REX LEE
RANGER OF THE SKY

THOMSON BURTIS

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RANGER OF THE SKY

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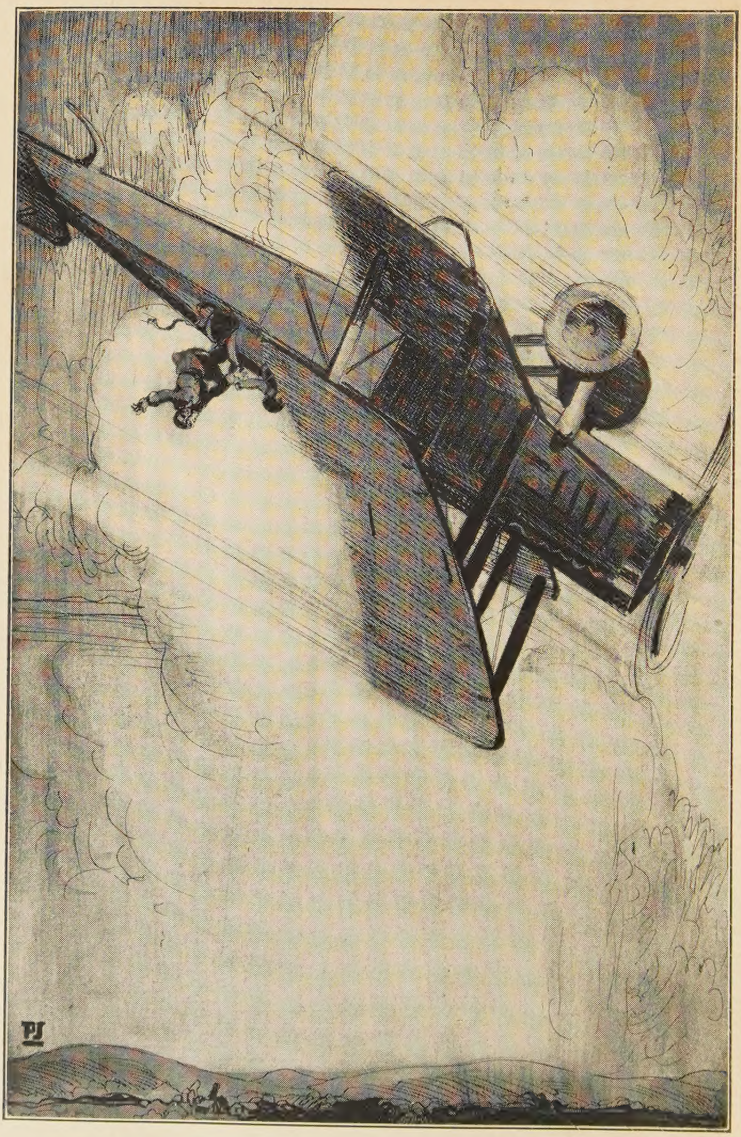

HIS ARM SHOT OUT JUST IN TIME TO GRASP ONE CLAWING HAND.

Rex Lee, Ranger of the Sky. *Frontispiece* (*Page* 123)

REX LEE,
RANGER OF THE SKY

BY

THOMSON BURTIS

AUTHOR OF
REX LEE, GYPSY FLYER
REX LEE ON THE BORDER PATROL

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REX LEE, RANGER OF THE SKY

CHAPTER I

REX RESIGNS

The lanky, loose-jointed form of First Lieutenant Rex Lee, Air Service, emerged from the shadowed cloisters of headquarters, Donovan Field, Texas, into the hot golden sunlight. In his hand he was holding a very precious document. It signified that his resignation as an officer of the Air Service had been accepted and that as soon as he had called on a few officials and proved to them that he had no unpaid bills he would be Mr. Rex Lee—no address.

The adjutant, a rotund and dignified young man who strove to make up in serious and conscientious deportment what he lacked in age and experience, strode importantly out the door. Sanders had not yet recovered from the honor the C.O. had thrust upon him of holding down a desk in headquarters.

"Sorry to see you go, Lee," he said.

"Uh huh. Undoubtedly Japan'll attack just as soon as they hear I'm no longer one of Uncle Sam's hired men," returned Lee.

Sanders was constitutionally unable to understand persiflage of this nature, which was one of the mental traits which made him an inevitable adjutant.

Lee moved slowly up the shining road past a long row of huge white hangars to his right and an equally precise line of equally white quarters on his left. He lounged along like a long-legged, ruminative crane. His Stetson, as usual, was tilted slightly over one eye, and shaded a lean, hawk-like countenance which was tanned to the color of mahogany. The mouth was sardonic and firm, and above the high-bridged nose his blue eyes, puckered slightly against the sun, were like narrow slits in the thin face. There was a subtle spirit of perverse mockery about that face. It was the face of a man who was at once the eternal boy and yet a man.

He removed his cigaret and set it in the other corner of his mouth. So at last he had it, he reflected with a glance at the paper in his hand.

He grinned, and suddenly crooked lines from nostrils to the corners of his mouth leaped into being. One of them detoured from a straight course, and finally curved around the mouth at a considerably greater distance from the corner than its mate. This peculiarity gave a one-sided appearance to Lee's smile, and increased immeasurably the ironic qualities thereof.

He was thinking about the events leading up to that resignation. For months he had been fretting. The call of far-off places had been sounding in his ears with increasing strength. For years he had been a joyous adventurer in places and climes around the country and as the lure of the Air Service grew weaker, his thoughts, as those of his kind always have and always will, turned to paths which led around the world and back again.

It had been one sunny morning two months before that he had been moved to take off in a De Haviland for a lonesome flight, planning to work off his discontent by putting the big ship through complicated maneuvers such as he had been noted for ever since his days as instructor at Donovan Field ages ago. Suddenly the thought had come to him that it would be pleas-

ant to fly to Laredo, which was one of the stations of the border patrol. The wish was father to the deed. Without the formality of letting the Field know where its ship had gone, he had set out for Laredo.

On the way he had espied on the ground a man and a woman who appeared to be the captives of four horsemen bound for the Rio Grande. Having been a member of the border patrol for many months, Lee had formed the habit of being curious. So he had landed some miles from the party, worked his way back to them, surveyed the situation from a distance and then walked in for an investigation. He was possessed of considerable authority by reason of a cocked Colt and his use of the element of surprise.

He had found that Padre Joy, formerly an Army chaplain, and his daughter had been made captive and were being taken into Mexico to show a renegade Mexican the exact location of some platinum mines which the young sprig's father had willed to Joy before he died, in gratitude for Joy's services in helping him out of Mexico when Huerta and all his following had been deposed. The son having proved a

traitor to his father and his cause, had no share in the mines, which were newly discovered.

Joy was an ex-major of wide fame, now resigned for the purpose of developing his property. He had been awaiting the arrival of the old Spanish mining engineer with whom he was to develop the property. He and his daughter had been taken captive while on a morning drive.

Lee had succeeded in getting the Joys to his ship, and in taking off with them for Laredo. A newly arrived member of the band of outlaws had shot at them while taking off, and as a result there had been a matter of fire and a forced landing and wreck which had left the Joys unhurt, but which had put Lee to bed for many weeks.

The fact that his achievement became known the country over and that he was a newspaper hero for days did not affect the fact that he must stand a court-martial for having taken a ship without permission and started for the border. So Lee, his mind finally made up, had walked into headquarters within five minutes of his arrival at Donovan Field and put in his resignation.

That had been three weeks before. Now, reflected Lee, there were several things to be attended to. Tom Service, his sidekick in a hundred enterprises, ranging from service in the army of tricks in the forecastle of evil-smelling Gulf tramps, was in San Francisco. The quicker he and Tom could foregather, the better. That meant greasing the wheels of Army machinery so that he could get away with a minimum of delay.

Another matter was that of money. Having paid the best tailor in San Antonio $347 for three suits of civilian clothes and spent the rest of his bank-roll for other needed items of attire, he possessed only his pay check, which was now reposing in his pocket.

He glanced at his watch. It was nearly twelve o'clock. He wended his way into the quarters of Lieutenant Bob Cranford and Captain James L. Berry. He found them smoking cigarets and cursing the heat violently.

"Got it!" announced Lee, waving the accepted resignation. "I'm leaving the Army flat on its back. In order to leave it behind as far as possible, I crave to throw my pay check on the table and have you two rollicking gam-

boliers do likewise. Then we'll deal a cold hand for the works."

His offer was accepted promptly. Berry put down a check for $297 to equal the pay checks of the two lower-ranking flyers, and then shuffled the cards. Cranford cut them and Lee dealt them. He cocked his hat further forward on his head, took firmer hold of his cigaret, and slapped the cards down face up. When the last card made him kings up he picked up the three checks.

"That saves wiring Tom for carfare!" he grinned. "Thanks, and in case I don't see you again—"

There were two firm hand-clasps, two pair of eyes smiled into his, and he stalked out.

At one o'clock the next afternoon he climbed aboard the Sunset Limited bound for the Coast. The perfection of his attire could not hide, nor even camouflage, the stamp that the years had given him. He was as marked a man among the passengers as he would have been in uniform. The white collar seemed to deepen the brown of his skin, and in every lineament of it there was strength and experience. Beside him other men looked white and

flabby and overfed—which most of them were.

At El Paso a uniformed boy came down the car calling his name. Lee took the telegram, forwarded from Donovan Field, to catch him, and opened it.

Come to Parkerton, West Virginia.

TOM.

Five hours later Lee was reversing his route to San Antonio, whence he made his way to New Orleans and then up the coast to Washington. It was the evening of the fourth day when he dropped off the train at a small depot nestling in the mountains and made inquiry for a taxicab. In a moment he was in a Ford and chugging up a steep hill. He had confided his trunk checks to another jehu, to be delivered to the one hotel Parkerton boasted.

Four days' cogitation had left him totally in the dark as to what Service might be doing in a little West Virginia town. Of course, Tom might be up to anything. During the six years they had been separated he might have turned into any known species of business or professional man.

Their standing method of communication had

been through Lonny Sadler, who kept a waterfront restaurant in San Francisco and whom they had agreed to keep apprised of their general whereabouts. Service had been in San Francisco a month before. What was he doing in this town? Lee lighted a fresh cigaret, and grinned slowly. Whatever it was, it would be interesting. Service specialized in interesting things.

CHAPTER II

REX MEETS A PAL

The Parkerton House proved to be a big, rambling edifice having a veranda its full length, fronting the street, on both stories. It was evidently a popular gathering-place, for fully twenty chairs were tilted back on two legs while forty feet decorated the railing. It was on the main street, which was the only paved thoroughfare in town, and just at the edge of the business district. The business district occupied three blocks of stores. The town had the barren appearance common to its size and location.

An aged bell-hop took his suit-case and led Lee into the dark lobby. A middle-aged clerk with a ragged mustache pushed the register around and surveyed the new guest without interest.

"Is there a Mr. Service staying here?" inquired Lee as he embellished the register with his all but illegible signature.

"Yeah, he's here," replied the uninterested clerk, squinting at the scrawl on the register. "Tee? Lee? See—"

"Lee. What suite does Mr. Service occupy? Before you assign me I want to see him, if you please."

"Forty-three. Wanta call up 'fore yuh go up?"

"No, I'll just mosey. Boy, watch this suitcase for a minute or two till I get back."

The fifty-year-old boy shuffled over to a corridor and shortly reappeared without the suitcase. Then he led Lee up the steps, down a musty hall, and pointed out room forty-three. Lee gave him a quarter and knocked.

"C-come in!" came a well-known voice.

Its owner erupted from a chair and pumped Lee's arm wordlessly. The flyer's saturnine countenance became subtly softer as he grinned down at the chunky young man before him.

"How've tricks been, Tom?" he queried, removing his cigaret.

"N-not so bad. And you? Sit down."

"All right, but I got tired. Now, what the Sam Hill are you doing here, and for what reason was I instructed to follow you here?

Have you become a hardware salesman, like I once was, in your senility?"

"Pretty n-near it."

Service grinned, and behind the huge, tortoise-shell glasses a pair of large and round blue eyes peered affectionately at the lanky Rex Lee. Service was short and heavily built, and above the powerful torso a short, thick neck and round face were in harmony with his general architecture. His brown hair was cut in a short, stiff pompadour. His face was somewhat tanned, but the casual impression gained from the ensemble was that of a stout, round-faced, guileless young man with a soft voice, a slight hesitancy in speech, and an aspect of general good-natured neutralness.

As a matter of fact he was the son of a millionaire who had been twice governor of a great State, and had elected to forego the emoluments of his home for the joy of wandering. That chunky body was the dwelling-place of unbelievable strength, most efficiently trained and poised. Before cutting loose from the parental pocketbook, Service had learned something of four different languages in addition to achieving the education of a mining engineer, and by

reason of visiting most of the countries of the world between the ages of twenty-five and thirty he had become a linguist of no mean ability.

Lee, after watching him and testing him over years of comradeship, knew him as a wonderful rough-and-tumble fighter, a zestful soldier of fortune, who asked neither why nor how, but only where, and the possessor of the most remarkably keen and active mind he had ever known.

The silence had lasted for nearly a minute before Lee broke it. In that minute both men's minds had been like screens over which flashing pictures of the world had passed.

"Well, Tom, place yourself!" commanded Rex Lee.

"Sh. I'm a detective!" grinned Service. He was thirty-four in years, at least fifty in experience, and now, as his round blue eyes twinkled through his glasses, he looked a vapid twenty-five.

"Huh?"

Lee's cigaret was poised in the air, and as he considered Tom's news one corner of his mouth drooped still further.

"What might you be detecting, and why?" he inquired, placing his cigaret in his mouth and watching Service for any hint of mirth.

"Well, you know I was in the Army Intelligence during the war," said Service. "Got to be a major—"

"I forgive you!" interpolated Lee.

"—and was lucky enough to put over a couple of pretty good deals—one in Spain and the other in this country—Detroit."

"You always were a lucky devil, I remember," nodded Lee. "With your baby stare and your little stutter you're set—they fall for you like a fly for a spider. Proceed."

"Well, after the war was over I was in Germany for over a year on the same stuff. Got in on all this account of speaking French, Spanish, German and Italian, you know—"

"To say nothing of a common acquaintance with five or ten more. Proceed."

"I got back in Washington to chuck the whole thing up early in 1920. Then I got such a good chance with the secret service—promised some excitement up Frisco-way in connection with all this drug and liquor traffic—that I was persuaded to stay."

"Got inveigled, same as I did by getting assigned on border patrol."

"Un-huh. Well, that's all. Just been hanging around twiddling my thumbs, getting a little excitement, and making up my mind to quit and beat it as soon as something interesting broke. When your wire arrived in Frisco and happened to find me there I was all set to cut loose. Then this business I'm on came up, and the chief wanted me on it for two reasons —the job needed a little language, or might, on account of some foreigners being mixed up in it, and the man that'd been handling it got killed."

"Sounds interesting. What am I doing here? Hanging around watching you?"

"No-no," returned Service gently. "You get to be a detective, Rex."

"The deuce I do!" stated Lee calmly and without surprise. "What do I want to hang around the wilds of West Virginia for? I'd rather be in Texas. I want to go places!"

"Sure. But why not pick up some cash, hang around a few weeks and then we'll both hit for the south, north, east or west, I'm not p-particular."

"Well, that's a thought, too. I'm not very heavy financially. But tell me, how and why do I become a sleuth, what do I sleuth and how, how much of a financial persuader is there in it, and—"

"I've got it all fixed. You're just the man we need. You're to be a special agent, and unless I'm wrong you'll find you won't be b-bored. I'm the guy, you'll find, who has to sit around and do the heavy l-looking on, mostly. Listen, and I'll tell you the whole deal."

"Before that, I want to get set here. Does that door lead anywhere? If it does and the room's empty, I'll speak for it and get my luggage up. I take it we're to be in this town for a while?"

"I thought you'd accept the nomination," said Service calmly. "Yes, a week, anyway. Go ahead and get fixed."

Lee stalked out with the deliberate, long-legged stride Service knew so well.

"Same old Rex!" he was thinking.

The years had changed him somewhat, but fundamentally the lanky adventurer was the same. His face had lines in it that had not

been there during the days they had roamed in care-free abandon, squeezing the juice out of life as the opportunity presented itself.

But it was good to be with Rex again. This job ought to be over soon, and then a worldful of interesting places awaited them.

CHAPTER III

TOM EXPLAINS

Lee was successful in his request for the room adjoining Tom's and within a half-hour his trunk and suit-case reposed therein. The connecting door was unlocked, and Rex's lath-like form appeared.

"Before being inveigled with the speciousness of your arguments, I'll wet down the face and hands," he stated. "I'm getting in practice for a detective by glancing keenly at everything and everybody. I gather from the works on the subject written by bright young men in New York City that the first qualification of detecting is to glance keenly at everything."

He shortly reappeared, minus coat, vest and collar, and proceeded to drape himself in a chair.

"Shoot!" he commanded.

Service lighted a pipe which was as short and

chunky as himself, took off his glasses and polished them slowly, and stretched his short legs.

"Here's the proposition," he said, his words more crisp and precise than was customary with him. "During the last eight months there have been a series of robberies that have completely puzzled everybody from the Federal officials on down to the lowliest constable. It's only lately that they have been connected up—that is, been considered as possibly the work of the same gang.

"The first one was a jewel robbery in Badley, Texas. Badley is a town of around forty thousand. Two men walked into the principal jewelry store of the town—Shabinger's—at the noon hour when only two clerks were in the store. One went to the back of the store and got one clerk to show him some goods, while the other man got the other clerk to show him some rings nearer the front. Then they both pulled guns, and they got both clerks in the rear of the store, held by one crook and his gun. The other thief calmly locked the door and pulled up the curtains. Within five minutes they had both clerks bound and gagged, and had fifteen

thousand dollars' worth of the most valuable jewels.

"Within a half-hour after the crooks had left, another clerk returned from lunch, naturally got suspicious, and the police were at work within an hour. They had an excellent description of the crooks. One was a big man, described as about five feet ten, rather stout, iron-gray hair, hard face, and a small scar on his chin. The other man was shorter and rather slender.

"It was not many minutes before every town within a hundred miles had been notified. It happened that no trains had left Badley in the interim. Every train and road was watched. The crooks had simply disappeared into thin air. The jewelry taken was almost impossible to identify. They showed absolute familiarity with the stuff and where it was kept and what was the most valuable. The town was gone over with a fine tooth comb. The crooks were simply not there.

"The next one was in Mercer, a little town in Arkansas. Two men walked in the back door of the little bank there, after closing time while the day's accounts were being gone over, and

so forth—you know the bank men work for hours after closing time. They must have known the back door was not locked. They got eighteen thousand dollars.

"There were three men and two women in the bank, and all were bound and gagged. One crook was described again as a big man—description tallied with the robber in the Badley case. Other man was shorter, rather chunky, with a bristly mustache and black hair, about forty years old. Both men whipped on masks as soon as they got in the door, but the scar on the big man's chin—about half an inch long, at the right corner of the chin—is the same in both cases.

"The next one was the robbery of the home of a wealthy man in Seakirk, Missouri—pearl necklace belonging to the man's wife, and valued at forty thousand dollars. The man's name is Carson. He was away on business and on Sunday afternoon Mrs. Carson was in the house with the butler and two maids, both of whom, it seems, were in their rooms.

"Big man in it again—held up the butler when he opened the door, and with the aid of a confederate who is described as clean-shaven,

thin-faced, gray-haired, and about five feet ten, bound and gagged the butler, went up-stairs to Mrs. Carson's room and forced her to open the safe and give them the necklace. They also took other jewelry worth eight thousand dollars—rings and things.

"To make a long story short, the thing totals up three robberies of jewelry stores, two bank robberies of the same type as I described, the robbery of the Carsons' home, and one pay-roll robbery, when the guards carrying the pay-roll of Seaman and Company, manufacturers, in Elkton, Tennessee, were held up in broad daylight. There were two of them, and one shot at the robbers. He thought he missed but as a matter of fact the guns of both men were later found to be loaded with blanks. Rigid investigation has not shown a thing to prove the men were in on the robbery. It remains a mystery. Both men have been in the employ of the company for years, both are family men, and neither has shown any signs of sudden prosperity.

"In every case the man—big, tall, stout, with iron-gray hair and a scar on his chin—has been identified more or less completely. In each

robbery except those of the jewelry stores masks were used, but the general description fits.

"But the point is that in every case these thugs have made a clean getaway. In the first case in Badley, for instance, when it was only a matter of a few minutes before the police got into action, they never found hair nor hide of the men, nor any trace of them. Same with the other jobs. Another thing which balks us is that none of the jewels, so far as we can learn, have turned up. Of late months every known fence in the country—you know what a fence is, don't you?"

"Receives and disposes of stolen property," nodded Rex.

"Well, they've been watched and there isn't a trace. In every instance except that pearl necklace the robbers have taken stuff that was not conspicuous—no single item big enough to be noteworthy or easily identified. By changing setting, and other ways, most of the loot could be well disguised, but even so, if they were disposed of in the ordinary way, I believe we could have gotten some clue. Either these crooks are holding them, or else they have a

brand new method of disposing of them. They only took currency from the banks, and of course the pay-roll robbery was cash.

"I'm just giving you a sketch of the thing because your job won't require any knowledge of the exact details."

"I still don't see where I come in," announced Rex. "Have there been any ungodly machinations of the underworld in Parkerton?"

"I'm coming to that. Now to sum up what you need to know: there's a big, stout man with iron-gray hair and a scar on the lower right-hand corner of his chin mixed up in every one of these things, we believe. In every one of them we know there is a big stout man—we can't swear to the scar in the cases where a mask was used, but it's reasonable to believe it's the same man. In the second place, they have always shown a complete familiarity with every job, despite the fact that they have never been seen or heard of in those sections of the country before. They always know what the valuable things to take are, the location of them, and how to go about getting them."

"Clever boys," nodded Rex. "Any further

evidence that these diversified abominations are the work of the same outfit?''

Rex was sitting approximately on his neck, one long leg thrown over the arm of the chair, and his narrow eyes so nearly closed that they were mere slits in his bronzed face. Service grinned at him with eyes that were soft behind the big glasses and then answered the question.

''I'm getting to that. Now, item three that you want to remember is that in one case—the pay-roll robbery—inside assistance seems indicated. As I said, though, careful and expert work has failed to uncover any evidence at all. Nevertheless, there must be some. I may say that one of the guards was well acquainted with Schrader, advance agent of a big carnival called the Levin-Willet Greater Shows. This advance agent has no criminal record, and so far there has been nothing criminal unearthed in his brief but intimate acquaintance with this guard. Schrader spends as much as a week or so in a town before the carnival gets there, arranging things—publicity, license, and so forth. He's been shadowed for two months, without result. The reason for shadowing him is that

after the fifth robbery we found that the Levin-Willet Greater Shows had either been in or near each town at the times the robberies were committed. This came about after months of work—"

"What kind of work?"

"I wasn't doing any of it, but I can tell you. This business, notwithstanding fiction, is simply a big organization going over every possible detail, step by step, and from a mass of information, eliminating some, connecting up other seemingly widely separated items, and constructing, mostly with painful slowness, a structure which means something. About the only thing that was turned over to me to work on is that this carnival, as I say, has either been in or near the towns at the times that the jobs were pulled. In the case of the two bank robberies, they were forty miles away one time and twenty the other. One jewelry store robbery was pulled fifteen miles away from the carnival's stand. In the other cases, the show was in the same town."

"You figure that the usual gang of thugs that follow a carnival are responsible for these nefarious goings-on?"

"Not the usual gang of cheap crooks, no. Of course, it took the men on the case a long time to connect up the carnival with them at all. In the first place, the robberies were committed at long intervals, and not until after the fifth one did the thing begin to shape up as you can readily see. Then they went back over the cases, and found that in every case the carnival and all its attachés had been carefully gone over. There was not a sign of the crooks around the carnival lot in any case, nor any sign of the loot. Every employee and stranger had an alibi, and furthermore there was no identification. The crooks were not with the outfit. Each chief of police vouched for that.

"Nevertheless, it came down to the carnival being our best clue. I say 'our,' but of course at that time I wasn't working on the case. I'm telling you what was turned over to me by other men who have been or are working on it all through the country. The total loot taken from towns this carnival has traveled through is over $150,000. And no arrest yet and not much to work on.

"Well, finally, after several attempts at planting one of our men actually with the car-

nival, we succeeded. That was another thing that strengthened suspicion. This outfit simply would not hire a stranger even as a canvasman or other cheap labor. There are a lot of foreigners with it. Finally we located an agent who had had carnival and circus experience, spoke Italian and several other central European languages, and he finally caught on with the outfit. His job was to bore through from the inside and find out what was underneath the surface, if anything. Four days after he started, he was shot. In the trial, through a dozen witnesses, it was proved to be a case of self-defense to the satisfaction of the court.

"According to the testimony, the man was sneaking around the railroad compartment cars where the carnival people mostly live even while they are in a town. According to the testimony of these people he was ordered to come out of his hiding-place between two cars, and instead of doing so he shot and started to run. They gave chase—a guard and several men, and he shot at them. They shot back and killed him.

"Now that may be the truth. He was not an experienced man, and in his quest for in-

formation may have been too zealous to use his bean. Then again, he may have known too much and just got bumped. Anyway, he's gone and we don't know whether he found out anything or not.

"As I said, all efforts other than this to plant a man with the carnival have failed. Outside investigation has shown nothing except that this bunch is very successful in getting in right with town authorities. Nothing has been done about that, by our orders. We don't want to scare our game by picking on 'em for small stuff. Get the idea?"

"I commence to get a gleam of light," nodded Rex.

"There are several other facets to the proposition. This gang sure cleans up. Before the week's out there are poker and crap games in which the carnival employees clean up the townspeople, we know there's a lot of bootlegging, and so forth. Where they get the stuff to bootleg seems to be a sort of mystery, too.

"Bear in mind that all this time the advance agent, Schrader, has never been caught in anything crooked, and yet if this carnival is a

bunch of slick traveling crooks on a big scale Schrader must be an important individual. He apparently got wise to the shadowing game some time ago and it was called off. I'm going to start on him again. Our efforts must be bent as much to laying for the next stunt they pull as trying to unravel the other ones, see?"

"I see. And furthermore, I seem to gather that your whole basis may be built of rotten timber."

"Of course. But I believe not."

"Well, still my palpitating heart by telling me what I do."

"You join the carnival!" Service told him gently.

Rex gave no sign of surprise.

"How do I succeed where your Sherlocks failed? Ever give that a thought?"

"I used up that thought the minute I was assigned here and recollected that you would be available. It's a cinch. Reason? This outfit carries an airplane and it's one of their best little money-makers, or so one of the boys told me when I inquired around after this bright idea dazzled me. Consequently, banking on your old-time willingness to crawl seven miles

on your hands and knees for something entertaining, I got busy immediately. The bird who was doing the flying was arrested back in Meloburg, Ohio. That leaves the Levin-Willet shows without a pilot for their plane, and thus without the juicy grapes brought in by said concession. The plane is owned by the show.

"A flyer isn't easy to pick up—that is, a proven one who has had enough recent experience plus ability to safeguard the carnival's somewhat heavy investment. Get me? By telling the right sort of story, and very probably by appearing to be not too particular how you pick up money, you ought to be greeted with open arms, and if you use your astuteness ought to worm your way in far enough to get us some real dope. That plane and its possibilities ought to help you, and in addition you ought to be sort of an aristocrat around the show. See the idea? Then, after you're a fixture and one of the show's brightest young assets, pass me the dope."

Rex chewed his cigaret, gazed at the floor, and ruminated.

"You and the heathen Chinese are as one in being dark and devious. Well, for the sake

of prying you loose from this criminal environment, I guess I'll bite. You say you've got everything fixed as to my official status? All right. I presume this carnival heads in here pretty quick or you wouldn't be here."

"Tomorrow. Then you're all set for it, eh?"

"Seems to me I've been set without much chance of getting out," stated the flyer.

"G-good. It'll be f-fun, Rex," Service assured him. The crispness and force which had crept into his voice during his resume of the situation were gone, and he was again the gentle, hesitating young man.

"Now let's get everything fixed up—make sure you know all you need to, fix up who you are and why you're here, figure out how we're going to communicate with each other—"

"That last is important," remarked Rex. "I don't speak any languages but French, but a bullet is a bullet in any language. It'd be a shame for another man to get winged with his information still intact in his bosom."

For two hours they went over the scheme step by step, arranging details and examining the aspects of the problem with a great deal of care. Rex, familiar as he was with the flex-

ibility and keenness of his comrade's intellect, wondered anew at the instant decision and penetrating mental agility which Service showed. The project was not an entirely new type of adventure for Rex himself to embark upon—in the past he and Service had come in contact with emergencies when safety depended on getting information from hostile men, and the border patrol is likewise a fruitful source of experience in outwitting criminals.

At the end of the conference Rex was in possession of all the useful facts of the matter, and a definite plan of operation had been agreed upon.

"My *Nick Carter* imagination has been working overtime, and I have a dozen theories in my head that I'm not going to tell you," said Service at last. "It'll be a lot better for you to see what you can see and draw your conclusions from what you find out than it will for you to be going in there with a lot of ideas and trying to find out things that will fit into your pre-conceived notions."

"You're right there," granted the flyer.

His lips curved in that rather mirthless smile as he showed the fruits of Army life by

dropping his cigaret ashes upon the carpet.

"The thought strikes me anew, Tom, that you yourself would make a criminal hard to catch if you ever started to frame anything."

Service's face glowed as he grinned widely.

"Since I've been in this business I've learned how dumb criminals are. That's the reason they're criminals, I suppose. If I was a fiction writer I'd write a gorgeous yarn about a secret agent with years of experience that decided to go crooked."

"I might be persuaded to read it. Must be supper time. Better not advertise our intimacy, had we?"

"At-a-boy!" crowed Service. "You'll be a detective yet. You're right. The gang of drifters with the carnival'll be drifting in tonight and tomorrow. Eat by yourself and so will I. The guests of this hotel will provide good practice for your keen looks from now on."

"Well, I'll get on my duds and drift down. I'm feeling mysterious already, although I can't put my mind on it because I'm hungry."

So saying, Rex made ready to assume his disguise and plunge into a good dinner.

CHAPTER IV

CIRCUS COMES TO TOWN

The carnival train, consisting of thirty cars, arrived the next morning, which was Sunday. Rex made sure that the long line of compartment, baggage and flat cars was on the siding at the fair grounds by taking a walk in that direction just before lunch. The grounds were the scene of ant-like activity. When he arrived tents were already going up along the midway, and the Ferris wheel, various rides and other mechanical paraphernalia were being hauled off the cars and unloaded at various points along the line of stakes which marked the boundaries of the midway.

The rest of the morning he devoted to a casual survey of the town. It was very quiet, being Sunday, and there were few people on the streets. Most of the residential streets petered off into steep hills a few blocks from the center of town. Houses for three or four blocks in each direction were of fair size and appear-

ance, but before long became smaller and more dingy.

There were several mines within two miles of Parkertown, and a great many of the houses seemed to be the abodes of the miners. There were railroad shops, likewise, employing about three hundred men in addition to the railroad crewmen who made their home there. All in all Parkerton was the average town of from fifteen to twenty thousand people—sooty, grimy, barren and yet with evidence that a determined effort at progress was being made. Several stores were large and up-to-date in the matter of window-dressing, and the apparent quality of goods on sale, judged from the windows, was excellent. Many of the usual Sunday loafers were well-dressed, while others, palpably laborers in clean, gaudily colored shirts and Sunday trousers, seemed to have mutually agreed that coats and collars were out of order.

At lunch the dining-room was nearly full. It was not hard to pick out the carnival attachés. The women were mostly tired-looking, sallow-faced; the men tanned, hard-looking, somewhat sloppily dressed. Service had explained that

whenever a show was playing in a sizable town all those who could afford it scattered through the town to live as a welcome relief from the stuffy train which was usually the only home they had. There was a sprinkling of tables which held silent, loudly-dressed men whose faces did not invite confidence.

"By and large, not such a salubrious looking gang," was Rex's mental comment.

He could see Service, at another table, sizing up the people with that vacuous stare of his. Later, in his room he gave a parting word to Rex before that gentleman started after his job.

"I believe that you can't go wrong, old man. Keep your eye peeled, and talk turkey all the while to the boss. If this outfit's anywhere near what we think it is, the boss is a man of discrimination and acumen."

"Not to say intellect and deviousness," added Rex.

He entered the fair grounds a few minutes later with his usual bent-kneed, leisurely stride, and his customary cigaret. He did not look like Parkerton, either in face or clothing.

The midway extended in a straight line di-

rectly ahead of the entrance to the grounds, which were surrounded by a high board fence. Rex stopped at the first group of men he passed. They were engaged in putting the finishing touches on a tent which was evidently to be the palace of the hot dog.

"Where might I find the boss of this outfit?" he inquired of a swarthy, pockmarked man who was temporarily resting.

The roustabout took in his questioner from head to foot in a lightning-like glance, and then jerked his thumb toward the last car of the train.

"Office—last car," he stated.

"Thanks. Have a cigaret? What might this man's name be?"

It was one of the most hard-and-fast rules of the Levin-Willet Greater Shows that a stranger who seemed to be of any importance whatever was to be handled with gloves, particularly during the first few days of a stand. Rex, in appearance and manner, gave the impression that he was far from a nonentity. Consequently, he received a gruffly courteous answer.

"Name's Levin. This your town?"

The stocky, tough-looking workman nodded when Rex shook his head.

"Ps-s-st, Tony—the boss!"

Tony took a quick look at the approaching figure and then waved his arm.

"There he is."

Rex went to meet the man indicated. He was of medium size, and wore nose-glasses. He was dressed in a neat-looking suit of dark brown, and wore a Panama hat. His face, as the two approached each other and Rex got a good look at him, was long and thin, the cheeks holding large hollows. The mouth was wide and thin and from his nostrils deep-cut lines that seemed like furrows swept widely around the corners.

"Pardon me, but is this Mr. Levin?" inquired Rex.

"Yes, sir. What can I do for you?"

"Give me a job!" stated Rex, one mouth corner drooping a trifle.

"Huh?"

The short bark of surprise was Levin's sole effort at speech for several seconds. He looked at Rex as though the flyer were some strange

species of animal. Rex, looking down into the narrowed green eyes of the carnival man, knew he was dealing with a far from mediocre character. He felt that behind those probing eyes there was a personality of unusual strength.

"Here's a boy that has seen everything," was his way of putting it.

"What did you ever do in this business?" asked Levin.

He took from his pocket a box of Turkish cigarets, groped for one, tapped it on the box, and put it in his mouth without once taking his eyes from Rex's face.

"Nothing. But I heard that you were carrying a ship with you and that the man that flew it'll be in jail for some time. My name is Lee, and up to a week ago I was flyer in the Army Air Service. If you want a man to run your ship for you, I'm your huckleberry."

"That's it, eh?"

Levin's voice was remarkably deep, and had the peculiar bass which comes from much talking in a loud voice. Evidently he was accustomed to shout orders loudly enough to be heard above the tumult of busy workmen.

He lighted his cigaret, and his eyes contin-

ued to bore into the easily slouching flyer's.

"Lee? Name's familiar to me somehow—been in the papers for any reason?"

"I had a little adventure down on the Mexican border a couple of months ago—"

"Got you. Why'd you get out o' the Army?"

"I'm not here to go through any catechism—I'm after a job."

Rex had sized up his man, and decided that decisiveness and independence were qualities which Levin would appreciate.

"However," he went on, squinting at the ash on his cigaret through narrowed eyes. "There were a couple of matters came up that didn't get in the papers, and it seemed best to wait not on the order of my going. The Army was no place for me."

"Hum. How do I know who you are?"

"I can prove it on paper and in the air. I'm out for jack—get me? And I'm not proud. If you want a flyer with two thousand hours in the air to run your ship as it should be run, and are willing to give me a fair split, I'm your man. Why I got out of the Army needn't worry you, as long as you know that the cops aren't going to step in and grab me off."

"Come over to the office," rasped Levin abruptly.

They made their way down the midway, Levin walking with short, quick steps, and Rex with his usual stride. All around them there was seemingly inextricable disorder. Booths in all stages of construction, tents of varying dimensions being erected, a huge circular iron fence, apparently for an animal show, half-completed, women arranging candy and prizes on racks while men hammered and shouted.

It was new to Rex, and he enjoyed it. There were curious glances at him, but they were of short duration, for in the presence of the big boss industry was paramount. Rex noticed that there seemed to be various foremen and sub-foremen who roved from booth to tent to carousel, giving orders. Suddenly Levin's rasping voice broke into his thoughts.

"That suit didn't cost you less'n a hundred bucks. You say you're an ex-officer. What yuh want to go with a carnival for?"

"For the money. Looks are deceiving. I'm out to make a lot of dough in the shortest possible time. I can get it flying and I can get more around a carnival, or I'm a liar. I've

got friends in this business, and there's chances to pick up a little spare kale from time to time."

They picked their way through a gang of men who were erecting a circle of canvas designed to screen some open-air performance, and Rex followed Levin toward the train. Levin waited for Lee to catch up with him.

"If you're hired, Mr. Lee, you'll live up to the rules and regulations of this show, understand?" snapped Levin.

Rex grinned. He was more and more certain that the less he backed water the more firmly he would be entrenched for his project.

"I'm no babe in arms, Mr. Levin. I'm a highly skilled professional whose services you may need. As long as I keep my mouth shut, keep out of trouble, do my work and mind my own business you should worry."

They climbed the steps of the coach on the end of the train, and Rex found himself in a compartment car. The passageway led down one side, and from it opened several compartments. Levin led him into the first door.

Two compartments had evidently been thrown into one. There were three small

tables, one holding a folding typewriter, and three plain straight-backed chairs. A vertical file and a safe completed the furnishings. At one table sat a tall, thin man, partially bald. Bushy eyebrows, as blond as was his thin hair, shaded a pair of sleepy-looking dark eyes. His face, although not particularly full, gave an impression of flabbiness at variance with the leanness of his body. From his attitude at the table he seemed to be somewhat stooped. He was collarless and wore no coat. He raised his eyes languidly and surveyed Lee seemingly without curiosity. His pallid face had no more lines than a boy's and yet Rex could have sworn he was at least forty-five years old.

"Mr. Stanton, meet Mr. Lee. Now let's get to business," barked the vigorous Mr. Levin, removing his hat and taking one of the chairs. His hair was thin, iron gray, and parted in the middle. Seen in profile he had an undershot jaw and thin, jutting nose. He removed his nose glasses, and then reset them to his satisfaction.

"Mr. Lee wants to join as pilot on the ship," he told the quiet, tired-looking Stanton.

Stanton's lazy eyes, curiously without ex-

pression, rested on the tall flyer for a moment and then found the fly-specked ceiling.

"Well?"

"Just got out of the Army Air Service," rasped Levin. " 'Member that attempted kidnaping thing on the border—fellow named Joy and his daughter? Lee says he's *the* Lee. Got any proofs?" he asked, turning to the pilot.

Lee, prepared for something of the kind, silently pulled the correspondence anent his resignation from his pocket, and handed the sheets to Levin. The carnival man looked them over quickly, and handed them to Stanton. Lee lounged easily against a table, smoked slowly, and watched the busy scene outside the window. The hum of industry, rising and falling, drifted through the open window.

"Says he got out of the Army for private reasons—avoid trouble. 'M I right?"

"Absolutely," returned Rex.

"What reasons?" inquired Stanton in a weary voice.

"My own," was the prompt retort. "The only thing that concerns you or this job is the knowledge that there won't be any police yanking me from your midst."

"How do we know?" snapped Levin.

"Because I'm telling you, and using my right name."

"How do we know you can fly?"

"I can show you a pilot book with two thousand hours, and can show you in two seconds with a ship. Let's let that go—I want action. I know I've got the goods, so let me take a turn asking questions. First, can you use a pilot?"

"Maybe," said Levin.

"What do you mean maybe? Got some one else in view?"

"Fellow that's been mechanic wants to try it, but he hasn't had much experience—"

"Count him out!" said Rex, for all the world as if he was running the entire outfit. "That is, unless you want your investment and a lawsuit as risks every flight. No flyer knows anything under five hundred hours. Second, how much is there in it for the pilot?"

"Two and a half every ten minute ride with passenger. I supply everything for the ship —you pay your compartment rent and grub. Advertising flights you make free whenever I say so."

"I don't," said Rex promptly, "whenever in my judgment the ship or the weather aren't right—"

"Course," barked Levin. "Then there's occasional extras—"

"Such as—?"

"Oh, various things—neither here nor there now."

"Just what is your idea of joining a carnival?" inquired Stanton. Lee noted the excellent English and cultivated voice of the tired, stooped man, who seemed strangely out of his element.

"I got out of the Army—under a cloud, if you like. I want to make a lot of dough, and I want to make it quick, and I don't give a hang how I make it!"

"How much do you figure you can make with a carnival?"

"At the rate the boss here mentioned, I ought to clean twenty a day net on passenger flights, conservative estimate. Traveling with this outfit will give me some other openings, or I know nothing. Gentlemen, assuming that I've got the flying goods and have cut my eyeteeth and am not entirely unfamiliar with some of

the underground on carnivals, do you want to hire me? I may have too big an idea of what I can do, but I might turn out to be a valuable man. The possibilities of this air stuff have never been cashed on yet."

There was a moment's silence.

"Mind steppin' outside a minute?" said Levin.

"Sure."

Rex went out to the vestibule. He hoped he hadn't overplayed his hand. He had deliberately sought to give the impression of a bold, independent ne'er-do-well, none too scrupulous, and with eyes wide open for the main chance.

"Wish I could listen in on 'em," he was thinking. An idea struck him and without wasting an instant he followed it. Walking noiselessly, he came near the open door.

"Get him sized up," Levin was saying.

"He might be just our man—"

"Pardon me, gentlemen," interrupted Rex, making his last two steps to the door serve as a warning. "One point in my favor I forgot to mention. Thought it might influence your decision. I used to be in the Fire Ranger Service in Oregon, and I did a lot of this rescue

stuff up there. That ought to be worth some publicity to you and cause a lot more people to take rides."

He went out again, the shadow of a smile on his face.

"This job's sure making me a shrinking violet," he opined. "So they're going to size me up, and I might be just the man they want, eh? I wonder whether my flying is all they're after?"

Stanton, he noticed, had seemed to shrink a trifle in his chair when he had appeared so suddenly on the scene. If he and Levin had not been momentarily startled, he was badly mistaken.

It was five minutes before he was called back.

"We'll take you on, on trial," Levin told him. "No contract until after your first flight and we have a chance to look over your papers. If satisfactory, contract at twenty-five per cent of what you take in on rides, subject to week's notice either side. Right?"

"Sounds so. When it comes time to sign I'll look it over more carefully. Where do I live, and where's the ship? How about a mechanic?"

"Got one. He'll be pretty sore about not gettin' the job himself. Stanton here'll take you around. Want to live on the train?"

"What do you mean—while we're in town?"

Levin nodded.

"Yes. I'm not spending money—I'm making it."

" 'Right. Get him fixed up, will you, Bill?"

Levin put on his hat and went out. In a moment he could be seen touring the grounds, stopping here and there to watch or advise the busy crews. The sound of hammering and sawing, bellowed orders, and creaking wagons formed a never-ending, discordant hum.

Stanton raised himself from his seat with apparent difficulty, and grasped a heavy cane which was standing in a corner. Rex noticed that his left foot angled sharply from the leg, pointing inward. Stanton leaned heavily on the cane, and limped badly. The stoop became very noticeable when he was on his feet. He put on a disreputable felt hat.

"All right, Lee. We'll find you a place to live—give you Eller's bunk."

"He the man in jail?" asked Lee as they walked down the passageway.

"Yes."

The car was deserted. Every one was busy, evidently. In one littered compartment he glimpsed a sleeping baby. In others clothing was hung on lines, and in nearly all of them big, battered trunks took up most of the slight floor-space. The car was old, with peeling paint and scratched walls. It was squalid beyond words.

Lee's mind was working busily as he and Stanton made their slow way through the second car. It was evident that his professional services were welcome in the Levin-Willet Shows. His attitude of independence very probably gained him something. He believed he had already started to establish himself as far from an ordinary employee.

His program now, as he saw it, was to ingratiate himself as far as possible with the carnival people, particularly the higher-ups. He and Service had both agreed that the possibilities in the case seemed to be only two: that the whole theory of the carnival's being connected with that string of robberies was absolutely baseless, or that extremely shrewd and daring criminals were using the carnival

as a base, so to speak, for their operations. It seemed an impossible theory that the ordinary gang of cheap pick-pockets, card-sharps, liquor and drug peddlers and other grafters could by any stretch of the imagination be responsible for a series of expert and lucrative robberies showing great professional skill.

Of course, it might be possible that expert criminals were traveling with the show as canvasmen, or something of the sort, but the chances, Lee believed, were that if anything at all was unearthed the big men of the outfit would be found concerned therein. And it was almost a certainty that the rank and file of the carnival were not connected with the robberies in any way. It would be fatal to have too many people knowing too much. Anything that might be learned from the great mass of attachés would be valuable only as furnishing isolated bits of information which, pieced together, might mean more to him than to the people who unwittingly gave him the information.

His job was to insinuate himself into the inner circle—and to accomplish that end without a trace of suspicion being attached to him. Operators such as he was set to catch would

not turn a hair at killing a man who knew too much—witness the fate of the other agent.

In the third car Stanton, who had been stumping along quietly, turned into a compartment. Lee stood in the door for a moment and surveyed the littered cubbyhole. There were two bunks, one above the other, and a trunk and various articles of clothing indicated that it already had one occupant.

"Manson—he's your mechanic—is in here, too," said Stanton.

"Well, I'm not," stated Lee. "I'll pay double, but I'm not bunking up with anybody for a while, unless I pick my own. Look at this. Think I want to live with a dirty bum?"

"It hasn't been cleaned up yet," admitted Stanton. "I—"

"Do I get a compartment by myself?" demanded Rex. "My baggage and so forth I don't want in a position to be tampered with, for one thing," he went on significantly. "And as I said, I don't hole in with any Tom, Dick or Harry on this show by a long row of beans!"

Stanton sat down on the edge of the tousled bunk as if very weary. The lack-luster eyes, pronounced stoop and flabby, dissipated-look-

ing face all contributed to the impression that he was very far from a healthy man. He lifted his crippled foot over the other knee.

"Of course, I understand your position," he said in his soft, husky voice. "There isn't any empty compartment—"

"Then I don't join the show!" bluffed Rex.

"Wait a minute, wait a minute," remonstrated Stanton gently, as if bored with the whole matter. "Tell you what we could do. You intend to live on the train all the time?"

Rex bit off the end of a new cigaret and nodded.

"Bert Sanders—he's got the animal show—always lives at a hotel. We can put him with you, and you won't be bothered with him except making jumps, and that's only one day a week. We'll put Manson and Kelly—he's in with Sanders—together. That's the best we can do."

"All right. Sanders pretty good fellow?"

"He's all right. You won't mind him."

Rex, after flipping away the match with which he had ignited his cigaret, happened to look at Stanton's foot. The carnival man was

gazing out the window. And the crippled foot, instead of angling inward, was now projecting almost straight forward in a normal position. Rex looked again, to make sure his eyes had not deceived him.

"Well, when do I move in?" he asked.

"Any time after three o'clock. I'll see that Manson is out of here by then."

"Where's the ship?"

"Dismantled, in a car."

"How about spare parts? Got any?"

"There's an extra motor, and a pretty good bunch of spares, I guess," returned Stanton. "You can see to all that tomorrow. Everybody's busy now—"

"I presume the ship usually flies from place to place, when the distance is not too great. That's better for the ship and cheaper."

Stanton nodded.

"Mr. Levin said something about advertising flights," remarked the flyer.

"The ship's painted with our name. It's been used to go over surrounding towns and drop handbills for advertising. By the way, you said you were a fire patrol fighter?"

Stanton's heavy-lidded, burned-out eyes rested on the flyer's face as he asked that question.

Rex nodded.

"It's on the official records."

"We'll get pictures and so forth to our advance man. Great publicity. You're a queer bird to want to join a carnival, Lee!"

Lee noted out of the corner of his eye that the man's foot was now at that abnormal angle.

"What I've done doesn't mean much in dollars and cents," he said. "I aim to make money out of this outfit, one way or another. You people'll find I'm not a bad *hombre* to have around in a pinch."

"I hope so."

The conversation veered to flying arrangements. Stanton seemed to have no idea of leaving, but rather was anxious to talk to the new employee. He admitted that the airplane had been one of the most lucrative features of the carnival. Whenever it was impossible to find grounds which would permit of being used for a flying field, it had been the custom to use another field and run buses from the carnival

grounds to the landing field for prospective passengers.

"All the hicks want to look at an airplane, anyway," Stanton said. "It always does business."

Gradually Stanton turned the course of conversation until he was unobtrusively pumping Rex as to his past career. The flyer, alive to his opportunity, drew on his experience a great deal and his imagination somewhat to give the impression that he had not always been within the law. Stanton, it appeared, had been around a bit himself. Several times he put in a quiet question designed to test Rex's familiarity with particular places and events he was talking about, and always Rex returned a satisfactory answer.

Finally Stanton got to his feet with an effort.

"That foot is a funny proposition—never heard of a man in that condition being able to move it around—" he was thinking. Aloud he said—

"If it isn't too personal a question, Mr. Stanton, may I ask how your foot was hurt?"

"Got all smashed up in a railroad accident.

I always will believe the doctors set it wrong —anyway, instead of sticking straight out, it's always been twisted as you see."

The man looked to be an invalid as he stood, leaning heavily on his cane and as stooped as a very old man.

"The muscles and all seemed to set just as they are so that the whole lower part of my leg is rigid." Stanton went on wearily.

"Can't move it, eh?" asked Rex sympathetically.

Stanton shook his big head. Rex noticed the loose jowls quiver with the motion.

"That's what put me in the carnival business," Stanton volunteered. "I used to be an actor before this came along."

"Tough luck," said Rex. "Well, I'll go up to the hotel, and come down with my stuff in about an hour. Right?"

"And don't forget your papers. Of course before we let you take our ship up we must be sure—"

Those opaque dark eyes swept across Lee's face swiftly, and then Stanton hobbled out.

Rex passed two slatternly helpers who were standing in the passageway talking, but he

scarcely noticed them. He watched Stanton's walk closely as the man limped along.

"He was lying about not being able to move that foot, or else my eyesight is going bad on me," the flyer thought. "I can't see that it means anything, though. He may be one of these birds that like sympathy, and yet he doesn't appear to be that sort. Pretty wise egg, from the way he was pumping me back there. Well, he's one of the big bugs of the outfit, apparently, and as such every little thing about him is important, I presume. Used to be an actor—hum."

He went to his room in the hotel, and then passed on into Service's. Tom was taking a nap, but Rex awakened him unceremoniously and reported. Service did not seem surprised.

"I d-didn't figure you'd have much trouble," he opined, blinking owlishly as he put on his glasses. "Tell me how the outfit shapes up."

Rex told him, and then on to the matter of Stanton. Service's round blue eyes grew brighter as he listened.

"Well, just for luck we might have a look at this bird's past career. Pump all of 'em as

much as you can. What they say'll probably b-be lies, but might be the truth."

"Strikes me that this undertaking is going to require considerable time, Thomas, my boy," remarked Rex.

"M-maybe. I told you my imagination had been at work, didn't I? Well, mate, you may get a quicker chance to sit in than you think. You are occupying what is known as a strategic position, Rex."

"It may be strategic, and it's almost bound to be uncomfortable," returned Rex dryly. "When do you leave to get inculcated with Schrader's doings?"

"That's a wicked sounding word you used. I'm l-leaving tomorrow. I'll gather my mail the rest of this week at General Delivery, Youngsville, West Virginia. You'll get yours from me at General Delivery here."

"Good. So long, then. I must get my luggage under way."

"B-by. I may be popping in any time. Write me all the dope."

CHAPTER V

REX SCENTS A MYSTERY

Within an hour Rex was aiding the truckman to carry his wardrobe trunk into his future abode, which was no light job, in the narrow corridor. True to his promise, Stanton had caused all of Manson's possessions to be moved, and the compartment had been cleaned as well as supplied with yellow, coarse, but clean bed-linen.

Rex was at home as soon as he opened his trunk, no matter where he might be. He left it unlocked purposely, and intended to continue leaving his possessions in a manner that would present no difficulties to the curious. He made certain that one document was not too easy, and yet not too hard, to get at, and that each drawer of the trunk was in such condition that he could tell with certainty whether any alien hands had investigated.

This done, he carried a small gray book and some other papers with him to the office. He

found the office occupied by a *petite* damsel with brown hair and eyes, very red lips, and an oval, olive-tinted face.

"I beg your pardon—I was looking for either Mr. Levin or Mr. Stanton," said Rex, lounging against the door.

"One of them'll prob'ly be in before long," she answered. "Anything I can do for you?"

"I don't believe so."

Her quick glance took in the quiet perfection of Rex's attire.

"You're the new flyer, ain't you?" she demanded.

"I am."

"I thought so."

Her large brown eyes dropped, and then she turned slightly and looked out the window.

"Here they come now," she remarked, gesturing toward the open window.

Rex could see the two men walking toward the car. The grounds, he noticed, were commencing to take on the appearance of readiness. There were two long lines of tents and booths, and here and there riding devices were assuming such shape that one could tell what they

were. Gaudily painted signs were commencing to fly from every available post and wire.

"Doesn't take long to get things in shape, does it?" he said.

"Not very. New to this business, ain't you?"

"Absolutely green, Miss—"

"Barrett. And your name's Lee."

She was really very pretty, Lee thought dispassionately. And she, like Stanton, did not seem quite the type he had expected to find. There were lines of hardship in her face, though, Rex thought.

"Well, you don't know what you're dippin' into, Mr. Lee," she said, sitting down before the typewriter. She smiled—a puzzling sort of smile—and then dropped her eyes as if in sudden shyness. She placed a sheet of carbon between two perfectly plain white sheets and put them in the machine. When Levin and Stanton came in she was clicking away busily.

"Saw you coming," Lee greeted them. "Here's my references."

After Levin and Stanton had taken their seats the tiny office was so full that Lee continued to stand in the door. The two men

looked over the pilot book. They appeared impressed. Lee, watching closely, caught an unspoken message that Levin flashed to Stanton, and saw that wreck of a man nod ever so slightly.

In a few minutes the girl went out, after laying what she had written in front of Levin. As she passed Lee she glanced up at him, a curious look in her eyes.

"Seems to be all right," grunted Levin, tilting his Panama forward on his head.

"If you gentlemen have the time, I'd like to get a little dope. First, where do I eat? Second, what kind of a ship have you got, what spare parts, how old is it—"

"Cook tent right out there," interrupted Levin. "Board and compartment taken out of your week's time—"

"Perhaps Mr. Lee might rather eat with us in the car," suggested Stanton in his husky voice.

Levin's chilly green eyes flashed to Stanton's face.

"Well, I guess that'd be all right—"

"What's the difference?" demanded Lee.

"The executives eat on the privilege car," ex-

plained Stanton, as if it were an effort for him to talk. He passed a slim, well-kept hand over his bald head. "When we're making a jump most of the outfit eats there, but not at a stand. You might like it better."

"Thank you. I would. That's one thing I want to get right, Mr. Levin—my status with this carnival. I hope you won't think I'm trying to lay down the law or anything like that—I know you're running the show and I'm one of your employees. At the same time, I'm not hiring with you as a canvasman or some freak, and I don't intend to be classed with 'em. I'll do my work and take my orders from you gentlemen, but I expect to live like a human being and be treated as such."

Levin said nothing, but his eyes were boring into this remarkable applicant for a job as though trying to probe into his innermost thoughts.

"That will be all right," said Stanton soothingly.

"I'm glad of that. Now about the ship."

Levin, in terse phrases, told him it was a ship of the type used for training during the war, fitted with an extra-large gas-tank.

"Eller tended to technical end—look over parts yourself—see if you need anything extra. Get busy in the morning."

Rex nodded.

"You can buy those Jennys now, brand-new ones, from the Government for two hundred and fifty dollars, and fifty dollars for an extra motor," he remarked. "Repair depot at Montgomery. If I were you I'd invest in an extra plane or two—that is, if you continue to keep up the air end of your game—"

"Say that again!" commanded Levin.

Rex explained that the Government was selling ships that had been purchased for war use, and never even uncrated, for that ridiculously small sum, and just how to go about getting them. Levin took down the address of the repair depot and the name of the man to whom to write. He was evidently interested, and, Lee judged, pleased at the new flyer's alertness.

After a little more desultory conversation Rex, who had taken the stenographer's chair, arose.

"Well, I won't take up any more of your time—" he began, but Levin interrupted him.

"Si' down. Good a time as any to talk business. How does this contract suit you?"

The contract suited Rex—twenty-five per cent of the gross takings, and such advertising trips as were deemed necessary. The show stood all expense, including pay of one mechanic.

"Any trips aside from advertising'll be arranged separately. Sometimes I make quick trips myself to next stand or something like that. Good publicity. Fix everything up tomorrow."

Under Stanton's questioning and guidance Rex was drawn on to talk more of his career before entering the Army. He was careful not to say so much that he could be thought a loose talker, but managed to work in a yarn or two which suggested matters not precisely lawful and his part therein. They were imaginary, but he hoped they would have the proper effect on his hearers.

He was using every faculty he possessed to analyze the two men before him, and he was certain that they, in turn, were continually striving to appraise him. That apparently casual conversation, using the valuable time of two executives, was not without a purpose. If

it was so important to them to know just what sort of a man they had working for them, and what his qualifications and ideas and possibilities were aside from flying, there must be a reason, or several reasons.

So Rex acted his part, and wondered.

CHAPTER VI

COMPLICATIONS

He awoke from a sound nap, in his compartment to find a small, dark-haired, dark-mustached little man looking down at him.

"My name's Sanders," said the man with a flash of white teeth. "I'm planning on moving a box o' stuff in here if yuh don't mind. I'm living uptown, but I want to put some stuff in here—"

"Sure. I'm Lee, as I suppose you know."

The animal trainer was as lithe as a cat, and his grip was as strong as his hand was small. He dragged in two wooden boxes with hinged covers and locks on them, and succeeded in jamming them under the lower bunk.

Rex equipped himself with a towel and some soap and made his way to the washroom. It was early evening. From without that babble of noise still went on uninterruptedly, but he noted that several compartments were occupied. There was the wail of a baby, a woman's voice

shrilling to a crescendo, the noise of something falling. Over the whole car there was the combined stench of food, none-too-clean clothing, and the close, dusty odor that never seems to leave a railroad coach.

When he returned Sanders had gone. Rex carefully pulled out two of the drawers of his trunk, but they had not been disturbed. He got out a mirror, put on a collar, tie, coat and vest, and treated his thick brown hair to a quick combing. His toilet completed, he started for the privilege car.

He was to learn much, later, of the privilege car and what went on there. As he walked down alongside the train in search of it he wondered why it had been given the name.

The carnival grounds were shrouded in darkness, studded with electric lights. In the dim glow cast by these lights the carnival looked to be ready for business, although every man seemed to be busily at work. The Ferris wheel loomed dimly through the gloom, the carousel was indicated by a circle of lights, and many lanterns bobbed along between tents and shacks. Apparently as little work as possible was to be left for the morrow.

When he reached the privilege car, which could be plainly identified through the windows, he climbed up the steps and entered, curious. He saw what had once been a dining-car. Starting from the kitchen at the upper end a counter ran down the center of the car for a little more than half its length. Before this counter a considerable group of men were standing, drinking a colorless liquid from small glasses.

"Moonshine," thought Rex. "There's one reason for the car's name."

The other half of the car seemed to be designed for a shabby clubroom. There were straight-backed chairs, and no carpet. Several folding tables were stacked in one corner. Inasmuch as there were no stools in front of the counter, Rex surmised that the executives of the show were served their meals at these tables, and that he was very late.

Sudden silence fell as he lounged up to the counter and caught the eye of the squat, bullet-headed man behind it.

"Am I too late to get anything to eat?" he inquired.

The man wiped huge, hairy hands on his

apron and surveyed Rex through piglike little eyes.

"Who might you be?" he inquired.

"I might be Julius Cæsar, but my name's Lee and I joined today. I'm taking all my meals on the car."

Lee had made this flip answer for a reason. The counter man had been somewhat truculent, and Lee had decided that the more successful he was in creating a distinct distance between himself and the low-grade employees the closer he would ally himself with the big men, which he conceived to be his most hopeful line of attack. It would not be an easy matter at that to become friendly enough to extract information from the rank and file of the show and still maintain his assumed position as one of the "Upper Ten."

"Guess we can fix you up with some ham and eggs," grunted the counter man grudgingly. "Pete!"

A negro in a dirty apron and still dirtier cap appeared at the door of the tiny kitchen.

"Fix up some ham and eggs and coffee and bring 'em on!"

"Yassuh!"

A sudden burst of laughter from the group of men at the lower end of the bar caused Rex to turn toward them. They were a tough-looking lot, all but two of them coatless and several in soiled undershirts. Their hands and faces were smeared with dirt. Most of them were evidently common laborers.

"—have to be salutin' around here from now on!" came a husky voice with a touch of brogue.

Evidently the liquor was having its effect, for the laugh was out of proportion to the humor of the remark. Several of the men looked furtively at the flyer, as if frightened at their own temerity.

"Yessir, eats ham and eggs and everything!" went on the speaker, and another laugh was his reward.

The man was standing nearest Rex, facing his companions. He was a burly, brick-haired fellow, his big bare arms covered with a mat of reddish hair. He tossed off a drink of straight moonshine and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

There was silence for a moment, and then he erupted again.

"The boss ought've known better," he pro-

ceeded. "Give me another shot, Bill. Yessir, oughta known better than tuh expect a full-blown shavetail t' be sleepin' in the same car with a mechanic, tuh say nothin' o' the same shack. Why, it's a honor tuh the show just tuh have 'im around!"

Uneasy chuckles came from the listeners.

The counter man served the loquacious drinker with his order.

"Better pull in yer neck, Tommy," he advised in a low tone.

Rex was wondering just what his best play would be.

"Give me a drink, please," he said, his mouth drooping on one corner.

"Bring out the champagne, Bill. Don't yuh know who yuh're talking to? Flyers don't drink nothin' but—"

"What?" inquired Rex easily. "I'm ordering lemon pop!"

The man turned with ostentatious slowness, holding his full glass in his hand. His face was big and full, and he had a scraggly red-brown mustache. His fleshy countenance was red as fire, whether naturally or as the result of liquor the cool Rex could not determine.

"Excuse me, sir," said the Irishman with mock humility.

The flyer had not decided whether the man's attitude was really inimical or not.

"For what?" he asked.

Every eye was on him now. From the kitchen came the sizzle of something frying—otherwise only the hum of the workers outside broke the silence.

With a sudden movement the carnival man spilled some of the liquor on Rex's coat.

The man turned around.

"Slim, what'd yuh bump me for?" he asked mockingly.

The man called Slim was standing at least two feet from the trouble-maker. He grinned uneasily and his furtive eyes shifted to the ceiling.

"Why—why—"

Rex made his decision. A long arm reached over and grasped the big Irishman's shoulder. He spun around in that grip as though on ball-bearings, and barely retained his balance.

"Now excuse me!" said Rex, his eyes boring into his tormentor's.

Then the newest employee of the carnival

reached down, grasped the man's arm, and deftly spilled the remainder of the liquor on the Irishman's flannel shirt.

The glass came down on the counter with a smash. The blue eyes flamed murderously. With a bound Bill, the barkeep, vaulted over the counter. He grasped the irate drinker.

"Outside!" he commanded.

"I'll come with you," stated Rex with finality. "Keep my ham and eggs hot, please."

Bill was at a loss. The rest of the group were divided, apparently, between fear and the desire to witness a fight. Rex, as cool and calculating as ever, saw, and congratulated himself.

"I'm the object of more or less respect around this show already!" he was thinking. "The boss must have been around."

A stream of threats burst from his prospective opponent as they went out the door, Rex in the rear. The Irishman was explaining in detail how he was going to take that high-hat shavetail to pieces and then put him back together again with so many parts missing that he would be unable to navigate successfully for some time.

The car-lights shone dimly over the wide roadway, between the tracks on which the carnival train was standing and another switch. The train separated the carnival grounds and the prospective site of the battle, so there was little likelihood of interruption. The knot of men spread out along the side of the car, their attitude somewhat uncertain.

"Take off yer coat, lieutenant!" sneered the Irishman.

"You've been drinking—want to postpone it?" inquired Rex.

"Postpone, your granny! I can lick a man who spills my own likker on me with all the 'shine in West Virginia on me!"

Rex stalked out into the roadway. He had no hat on, and he did not offer to remove his coat. He had sized up the powerful carnival man—the fat around his middle and the somewhat bloated face. Rex had acquired, in divers places and emergencies, a remarkably efficient knowledge of battling.

"Come ahead!" he invited, standing there easily.

His opponent approached slowly. When he came close to Rex the big flyer bounded in. His

hands moved wraith-like in the dusk. One sank home in the Irishman's stomach, and drew a strangled breath.

Rex gave him no peace. The blows came so fast that the big fellow had no opportunity to do anything but guard, and that not too successfully. Rex had the advantage in height and reach, and he used it to the utmost. He was in and out like a flash, and always those workman-like blows sank home to the body.

He was using the first principle of fighting, when one's opponent is not a professional in the best of condition. Blows to the body are what hurt the ordinary man, and his condition is rarely good enough to withstand them.

His antagonist, however, was surprising him. He was giving ground, and so far had only lashed out with his big fists twice, neither time reaching his mark. Rex's arms, working like pistons, were keeping him too busy. He was puffing noisily, and had settled to a crouch, the better to guard himself.

Rex bent from the waist to avoid a wild swing, and then leaped in with a feint to the head and a terrible right to the midriff, carrying all his weight with it. Two of the onlookers

caught their champion as he fell backward toward the car. Rex dropped his hands and stood waiting.

For a few seconds the Irishman seemed to be groggy on his feet. Then, with catlike quickness that seemed incongruous in so big a man, he leaped forward.

Rex was compelled to give ground in his surprise. Ducking and side-stepping with effortless ease, and using his close-held arms and hands to guard, he weathered the storm with not a blow having landed except on arms and shoulders. His adversary was boring in to close quarters, and Rex had no relish for that embrace.

Suddenly the man loosed a terrible would-be haymaker that started from his knee. Following it was a left jab. Rex side-stepped, and the man's momentum was so great that he overbalanced and fell in the slippery footing.

He bounded to his feet. Just as he straightened the flyer let him have it, one—two, to jaw and stomach, and followed that with a bounding attack in which the blows came so fast, and he slipped in and out so quickly, that he seemed to be floating on air. He might as well have

been made of air for all the success the other man had in reaching him.

The big fellow was weakening—that last attack had him really gasping for breath. Sweat was running down his face in streams.

Rex bent from the waist under a wide right swing. As he went under it his left foot went forward and his right fist came around with all the momentum of his forward movement plus every ounce of strength in those long, whip-like muscles which made his lanky form so deceiving. It seemed that the fat closed over his fist as the blow went home.

Slipping out to the Irishman's right, he saw the man swaying on his feet. Rex measured him, and sent him to the ground with a right which reached the button.

He dusted his hands—he was acting, now, for the onlookers' benefit—and lifted the bleeding, dazed victim to his feet.

"I guess that'll be enough, won't it?" he inquired.

The man slumped toward Rex, too weak to stand.

"Get him, some of you fellows!" commanded Rex simply.

He noticed the faces of Bill and the negro chef peering out the window.

"Now let me tell you something," said Rex as his recent antagonist sat on the ground and wiped his bleeding nose. "A real good idea around this show will be to let me mind my own business. I crave no comments or interference at all. Get me?"

There was dead silence.

"I guess you do. You'll find me just as easy or just as hard to get along with as you want."

He walked over to the bleeding gladiator.

"Shake and call quits, eh?" he said.

The man hesitated a moment, as if puzzled. Then he growled something indistinguishable and grasped the out-stretched hand momentarily.

"Well, me for the ham and eggs. By the way, my name's Lee."

The Irishman got to his feet slowly, spat, and his battered lips twisted in what might have been either a snarl or a smile.

"Mine's Manson, sir," he said. That "sir" had come with reluctance.

"Oho, my mechanic, eh? Be on hand at the

car at seven o'clock in the morning, Manson. There's a lot of work to be done."

As he climbed on the car those sardonic lines in his face were deep-cut.

"What a good start *that* was!" he said cryptically. "Have I got the makings of a friend, or an enemy?"

Then he saw Stanton. The cripple was just turning in the door of the car.

"What happened?" he asked uninterestedly.

"Fellow got fresh, and I had to educate him. Might as well teach the boys to leave me alone and mind their own business," stated Rex.

"You're a good educator."

"Wasn't hard in this case. He's my mechanic. What sort of an egg is he?"

"You'll find him all right, I guess," Stanton said absently.

"How about my ham and eggs, Pete?" asked Rex.

"Yassuh. Right at that table, suh."

A table had been put up in the corner, with wooden-handled eating implements already set out. Rex dropped into a chair and mopped his brow with his handkerchief.

"Just eating, eh?" asked Stanton.

Rex nodded.

Slowly the stooped figure limped out the door, as Pete brought steaming, greasy ham and eggs, some thick chunks of bread, and a diminutive dab of butter. He followed the choice collation with some coffee served in a cup that was heavy enough to kill a man without being cracked.

Neither Manson nor any of the spectators returned to the car. Probably had to work, Rex thought. He wondered what Stanton thought of the incident. Those lack-luster eyes never gave a hint of what their owner might be thinking behind that dome-like forehead of his. Rex himself was not certain as to the wisdom of his action but on the whole decided it had been all for the best.

"This swashbuckling may get me in trouble," he mused as his clamoring stomach thankfully received the heavy food, "but I'll have to stick to it."

He could think of no more effective pose. He could not be too close-mouthed and be accepted from the first as one who could be trusted with illegal secrets, nor could he appear a weakling. All in all, a two-fisted, experienced man who

could take care of himself and not be too scrupulous, not mix too much with the rank and file, and attend strictly to business, ought to assume a place somewhere near the top of the heap. Once there, it would be a simple matter to get a line on just what sort of an outfit the Levin-Willet Greater Shows might be.

One by one, tired, dirty men dropped in, usually taking a drink and going out. One or two stayed, for a few moments, and to them Bill evidently recounted the story of the fight, for there were an unusual number of furtive glances in Rex's direction.

He finally went out, and walked down the side of the train toward the sleeping car. He felt the need of soap and water.

As he entered he met the pretty stenographer of the afternoon.

"Good evening," Rex greeted her, stepping back to allow her to get out.

"Evening," she returned with a smile. "How do you think you're going to like us, Mr. Lee?"

"Time's passed fast so far," he returned.

The girl gave him a searching look, trying to determine what he meant.

"If it's not too personal a question, what do you do with the show?" he asked lightly.

"Stenographer mostly—once in a while I take a wheel or something when somebody's sick."

She might not be a bad person to be on friendly terms with, Rex decided. She glanced at his bronzed face, and then looked down.

"Oh, Mr. Lee, why is a man like you getting into this filthy, crooked—"

Her suddenly passionate words broke off in what seemed like a half-sob. She brushed past him and half ran into the next car.

She turned at the door, her face in the shadow, so that he could not catch her expression.

"I heard about your fight with Manson. Look out for that slob!" she said rapidly, and disappeared within the car.

"Her language isn't so refined, so to speak, but she seems to have the habit of saying a mouthful," grinned Rex to himself as he went down the car.

He met two women and a man in the aisle, and the staterooms seemed to hold a larger proportion of their lessees than had been the case

earlier in the evening. All conversation, apparently, was public property, for loud tones were the rule, whether the language employed was choice or not.

A thin-chested, scrawny man with a head two sizes too large for his body and a mop of bushy hair stuck his head out of the door of the compartment adjoining Rex's.

"You the new flyer?" he inquired in a deep bass rumble.

"Right you are," returned Rex.

"Hear you knocked the tar out o' Manson. Glad of it, the big Irishman—"

This opinion, given in a loud voice, somewhat shocked the none too vulnerable Rex, in the circumstances.

"Oh, no—we just had a little argument and there's no grudge held," he answered, and went into his compartment. He wondered who the man was. Later he found out that he was lecturer for the freak museum.

As a matter of form he pulled out the drawer of his trunk which held the few letters and miscellaneous correspondence he had with him. Then his indifference disappeared. The long, narrow eyes grew still more narrow, and his

mouth curved in a smile which held real pleasure. He shut the door, and went back to the trunk.

Without a doubt the papers had been disturbed. He had carefully arranged them so that the slightest tampering with them would be obvious. He took them out and ran through them rapidly.

One of them was gone.

"Talk about fast workers!" breathed the delighted Rex. "And Stanton knew I was up ahead eating!"

His mind leaped ahead. The loss of that paper meant much, for if anything in the world could help him to the position he desired to occupy in the scheme of things around the carnival, that theft was it.

He and Service, carefully figuring every possible angle in a dangerous project, had prepared that letter as a shot in the dark. Written on Tom's folding typewriter on a plain sheet of paper, it read as follows:

Dear Rex:

Just a line to tell you not to worry. There hasn't a soul suspected that this big

shipment of drugs got to San Antonio in your airplane. Although I wouldn't trust Thayer as far as I could throw the city hall, he won't blab unless he gets caught, and I don't see how he can. He's holding it in that garret of his over the garage, on First and Preston, until everything dies down and then he'll get rid of it O. K. You're safe and so am I, I think—not a whisper. We have been getting away with murder, though, haven't we kid? Glad you got out of the Army so quick and easy. Will send this registered. Let me know where you are all the time so I can get the rest of your share to you after the stuff's sold. My address is Baily Hotel now.

Hastily,

Joe.

"If they want to use you—and I'm hanged if I don't believe there's an airplane in this pie somewhere—they'll want to make sure of their man before they let him in on anything," Service had said. "The idea of going through your stuff may occur to 'em. A letter like this will make 'em think that not only are you a crook,

but that they've got something to wave over your head and *make* you fall in with 'em. Get the idea?''

Rex had distinctly. It had been his casual surmise, which it proved had been in Service's mind, too, that an airplane would be a useful thing for a crook's getaway. The planting of that letter had been a long chance, and apparently the chance shot had found its mark.

The tall flyer, his eyes like two lines of light in his face, set out for a walk; and in him there was a feeling of utter content which had been a stranger for weary months.

Rex craved action, and prospects were good.

CHAPTER VII

REX MEETS AN ENEMY

At six-thirty A.M. he absorbed a considerable quantity of nutriment in the privilege car, and thence made his way to the car where the ship was housed. It was several minutes before Manson arrived, his eyes heavy with sleep. During the interval Rex made a quick inspection. Both fuselage and motor were outwardly, at least, in good condition. He thumped the wings, which had been removed from the fuselage and were upended on their leading edges and held by sturdy thwarts, in the approved manner of shipping. His ear could detect no loose wires in them. At the end of the car a small set of bins held various spare parts—several sets of control and landing and flying wires, some spare struts and tail-skids, as well as an extra set of controls, consisting of rudder, elevators and ailerons.

Manson came into the car slowly. He was

evidently feeling somewhat morose as a result of consuming too much bad liquor.

"Morning, Manson. You're a little late, aren't you?" Rex greeted him.

The flyer was dressed in olive drab shirt and breeches, with a disreputable pair of field boots to finish off with. Manson himself wore overalls below and a dirty undershirt above. He glanced upward to Rex.

"I'm sorry, sir. Drank a bit too much, I guess, but the team ain't here to drag 'er over, anyways."

His attitude was neither sullen nor belligerent. He and his chief looked over the stock of parts, and Rex found that the motor spares were mostly conspicuous by their absence. There was a spare carburetor and magneto, a couple of pistons, and other larger units of the motor, but a very unsatisfactory number of spark-plugs, needle valves, floats and other small items which are most frequently needed.

"Let the spares get down pretty low, didn't you, Manson?" queried Rex.

"Ellers saw to all that mostly," Manson said apologetically. "Here's the team now."

Within an hour ship and wings and propeller were deposited on the inside of the track. The terrain was smooth enough, but none too large for the takeoff. However, it would serve, Rex thought. He and Manson succeeded in getting wooden horses, stepladder, and other things necessary to setting up the ship and rigging it, and at ten o'clock started to work.

It did not take Rex long to realize that Manson, although he overcame his tendency to loaf under Rex's sharp tongue, knew but little about the mysteries of an airplane. Time and time again he found that Manson was at a loss as to which bolt to use, and his efforts to appear efficient were almost pitiful.

In the middle of the afternoon, just as the first trickle of patrons had started in the gate of the grounds, Rex lost patience. He had been watching Manson try to true up the inner bay of one wing, and could see plainly that stagger, dihedral, and other matters were subjects of which Manson had no knowledge.

"Manson, what the deuce are you trying to do?" Rex demanded from his lofty seat on a stepladder, where he was endeavoring to get a cabane strut where it ought to go. "Come

clean now—how much d'you really know about rigging a ship? You could write it all on a dime and still have room for 'In God We Trust,' couldn't you?"

Manson looked up quickly, but without particular hostility. His fleshy, unshaven face was not appealing, but he looked like neither a sneak nor a bad actor, when one took his eyes into account.

"I'm more of a motor-man," he said hesitantly.

"Well, we'll see if you are. What are the parts of the carburetor on this motor; what's the principle it works on; and where would you look for trouble if, say, the motor started to miss because it wasn't getting enough gas?"

Manson tried to answer, but could not. In a general way, he knew a bit about carburetion, but in details and trouble-shooting his knowledge was *nil.*

"Well, I'll tell you, Manson," said Rex, seizing the respite to draw a cigaret from his pocket. "I'm a pilot, and no mechanical wizard, see? I don't pretend to know enough to keep a ship and motor running continuously without expert assistance. And as near as I

can see you don't know as much as I do. You said a while back you were in the Air Service during the war. Mechanic?"

"Yes, sir," was the reply, after a barely perceptible interval.

"I doubt it. Sure?"

Manson's eyes were on the ground. He thumped his thigh with a wrench several times, and then looked up with a twinkle in his eyes.

"Well, as a matter o' fact, I was a supply sergeant."

"That's more like it. Well, Manson, after last night I hate to do it, but it isn't any grudge. It's because I've got to have a real mechanic. I'll try and see to it that you get just as good a job around the show somewhere—"

"The deuce you will!" snarled Manson in ungovernable rage.

The man's face was flushed, and his eyes pinpoints of menace. The change was startling.

"You heard what I said!" Rex told him evenly, eying the man curiously.

"You ain't gonna fire me—get that!" said Manson truculently, his first flare of wrath now

settled to mere belligerence. "We'll see the boss about that!"

"This is as good a time as any for a showdown," and Rex uncoiled his long legs and clambered down the ladder.

The ship looked about ready to fly, which was deceptive. The wings had been attached and the wires partly taken up, but the monotonous, accurate work of rigging was still to be done. Rex decided that the few tools would be safe until they returned, so he said briefly—

"Let's go!"

Manson tramped along silently, head down. Rex, somewhat puzzled at the man's passionate resentment at the idea of being transferred to another job, would have been enlightened had he known what was going on in his subordinate's mind.

For there is an aristocracy in a carnival, a circus, or any other line of endeavor. It was not closely drawn and was very flexible in the Levin-Willet Shows, as in any other carnival. Nevertheless, from canvasmen to concession owners, from freaks to spielers, each had a place commanding greater or lesser prestige. And Manson, as mechanic and substitute flyer,

directly in the employ of the owners, had a position which appealed considerably to Miss Effie Bellair, of the chorus of the "Hula Girls" show. The thought of losing his high position was enough to fill him with fiery resentment.

Thus it came about that when Rex, cold and saturnine as was his pose, and his companion went in search of Levin, Manson grew constantly more determined to show this new man where he got off.

They found both Levin and Stanton in the small tent which was now executive headquarters of the carnival. It had been set behind the row on the midway. Perhaps a hundred people, largely children and their mothers, were wandering around the concessions. The barkers for the various attractions labored only spasmodically, and the men and women who ran the various wheels of chance booths and other prize-winning concessions were getting no play whatever. The tinny music of the merry-go-round struggled abortively against the torpor that overhung the grounds.

Manson got into action immediately.

"This guy wants t' fire me," he said wrathfully as soon as they had entered the tent.

"Huh! 'Smatter?" asked Levin.

"Oh, he wants tuh—"

"Give Mr. Lee a chance to put up his side first," Stanton interrupted softly.

"I've got nothing whatever against Manson here, except that by his work and by his own admission he's shown he's no mechanic," stated Rex. "I don't pretend to be enough of a rigger and motor mechanic to handle the job. I've got to have a real mechanic!"

"How d'yuh know what I can do?" demanded Manson loudly.

"I know enough. I won't argue the question, gentlemen. Manson is no mechanic, and I won't fly unless I have a good man—not for long, anyway."

Levin stole a glance at Stanton. Apparently the decisive owner was at a loss. For the first time Rex saw him hesitate. In some subtle way the impression that Stanton was the real power had been growing in Rex's mind ever since the day before. Little things—things that apparently meant little, such as what was happening now—were responsible for the thought. The quiet, dissipated-looking cripple was quiet and bored as ever, and yet he seemed

to be taking the situation into his own hands.

"Where could you get another mechanic, Mr. Lee?" he asked, tapping on the table before him with a long, very white finger.

"There ain't gonna be no other—"

"Shut up!" snapped Levin, and Manson subsided, but not, Rex noticed, as if cowed. In the background the stenographer had stopped typing and was listening with her eyes watching the group.

"Any sizable town—Parkerton, for instance—has got men in it who were mechanics in the Air Service during the war," stated Rex. "In a week or two, by advertising, we can pick up one who'll be crazy to go with a carnival. I'll keep Manson till then—"

"I tell yuh there ain't gonna be no 'then'!" stormed Manson, his face flaming.

"We'll fix you up all right, Manson," Stanton soothed him.

Then a remarkable thing happened, to Rex's mind. The burly Irishman leaned a hairy elbow on Levin's table and thrust his countenance close to the owner's.

"I said there ain't gonna be no other mechanic, see?" he gritted. "I ain't sayin'

nothin' about not gettin' the flyin' job when it was promised me, but I'm gonna stay right where I am!"

What Rex expected was that the forceful carnival man would treat them all to a demonstration of how to take care of an impertinent underling. Instead, Levin glanced again, as if for help, to Stanton. The cripple's eyes were lack lustre, his face seemed the same, and yet there seemed to be a deadly menace in his steady gaze at Manson.

"We'll talk it over later," he said evenly. "There may be—"

"We'll talk it right now!" raved Manson. "I ain't gonna quit, see? And you ain't gonna fire me either, see? I ain't no mechanic, eh? Well, I'm a good talker, and if I start to talk—"

"You'll probably talk too much, as you are now," Stanton cut in.

With a motion as quick as his movements were usually languid he had leaned forward and ground out those slow words with his eyes probing into Manson's. The equable tones cut off the Irishman's threatening words so quickly that Rex could but stand and wonder.

"I'll have a talk with each of you separately," Stanton went on, leaning back in his chair.

It was as if he had assumed a pose again. For a moment he had been a deadly snake ready to strike. Now he was a tired, bald-headed old man.

"All right," said Rex. "But there's no use of talking much to me. What I said goes as it lays. Come on, Manson. There's a lot of daylight left."

As he turned and went out he caught an unreadable look in Nan Barrett's eyes, but he had no time for her. That scene with Stanton and Levin had told him several things; as plainly, to his suspicious mind, as if they had been shouted from the housetops in so many words.

First, Stanton was the dominant character —at least in the underground schemes which he was now certain were afoot in the carnival.

Second, Manson had a hold on Stanton and Levin. He had stood there, an ordinary and intrinsically valueless employee, and laid down the law to his employers. He had frightened Levin, which Rex would have sworn was no

easy matter, and caused Stanton to temporize. And the more Rex thought about Stanton, the more he instinctively felt that the cripple was a dangerous man for all his pose.

Third, he himself had firmly established himself. Otherwise there would have been no delay in deciding whether or not Manson was to stay, for he had to fight Manson's guilty knowledge, not a mere mechanic.

As they started work on the plane Manson's belligerence had entirely disappeared. It was not hard to figure the big Irishman—his temper flared momentarily and was gone. He simply wanted what he wanted when he wanted it, and was not the type who held a grudge. Furthermore, Rex felt safe in ticketing him as a more or less obvious man. He was not a dangerous criminal, nor was he a man capable of planning and executing a complicated maneuver of any kind whatsoever.

There was still much to do when three tired men appeared with a big canvas tarpaulin to set up over the ship. Manson informed him that this was always used in lieu of a hangar to protect the ship from the weather. The flyer and mechanic turned to and helped the

canvasmen, for work on the ship was impossible until the canvas was up.

It was nearing mealtime when Miss Barrett, dressed becomingly in short skirt and sweater, approached and beckoned to Rex.

"Mr. Stanton wants to see you in his stateroom," she told him. "It's right next to the office on the car."

They walked through the now deserted midway. Rex noticed that the signs and false-fronts, as well as the pennants and gaudy decorations of the various attractions were all fresh and shining in immaculate colors. The merchandise displayed, likewise. Pervading the whole outfit there was an air of prosperity and efficiency which contrasted strongly with the few weather-beaten open-air attractions he had known.

"I knew that Manson'd make trouble!" she said suddenly.

"Oh, I guess everything'll straighten out," returned Rex. For a moment he felt inclined to say something regarding Manson's hold on the two men, but caution prevailed.

She looked at him directly. "I'm glad, in a way, you joined," she said.

"I haven't regretted it yet," he smiled, but the smile was not one to cause a flutter in any girl's bosom, and his eyes held a dispassionate question.

She said no more as they made their way between the canvas wall of the "Hula Girls" show and the animal show-tent.

"Did you notice anything funny about this afternoon—the way Manson acted?" she said suddenly.

"No," lied Rex.

"Well, I must go over to the office, again—the tent, I mean," she said. "And please, Lieutenant Lee—if there's anything I can do—anything you want to know that I—I can help you out—"

Her stammering words dwindled to nothing beneath his steady regard, and without completing what she had started to say she turned and walked rapidly toward the office tent.

"I'm undoubtedly a hard-boiled, flinty-hearted reprobate who ought to be kicked, but I wonder just what the pretty steno is up to?" he mused.

"She's in a different class from the other inmates of this attraction, and hails a fellow

human being of civilized tendencies, I guess," was his decision as he entered the car.

The door of Stanton's compartment was closed. Rex knocked, and was invited to enter.

The stateroom—a big one formed by making two compartments into one—surprised Rex. The one bunk was an upper, now folded, and the comparatively spacious abode was furnished with a good-looking rug, a Morris chair, a bookshelf and some autographed photographs of stage folk.

"How do you do, lieutenant?" said Stanton, who was sitting in the Morris chair. He was arrayed in a royal purple lounging robe.

"Sit down," said Stanton. "I wanted to talk with you regarding—er—Manson."

"I thought so," remarked Rex.

"We, Levin and myself, would like very much to have you keep Manson as mechanic if there is any—"

"Absolutely not!"

Rex had mapped out his campaign, and the keeping of Manson was now only a small issue. He meant to force Stanton's hand.

"Why are you so insistent on the subject? Has it anything to do with the fight last eve-

ning?" Stanton went on in a gentle tone.

"Very little. I've repeatedly said that I'm here because I see a chance to clean up the dough-re-me. I don't pretend to be a mechanic. I can't make money if the ship isn't working half the time. Manson isn't capable of keeping it working. And that's every bit of it."

"I see. Well, then how about hiring another mechanic—you see we consider the prestige of your reputation very valuable, Mr. Lee—and keeping Manson as a sort of figure-head?"

"I don't want Manson around!" stated Rex, looking steadily into Stanton's muddy brown eyes. "After what happened last night, and my being forced to recommend he be fired today, and with the knowledge that he wanted my job himself, I will not take chances of his deliberately doing something to get me out of the way. There's lots of things can be done to a ship—"

He left his sentence unfinished purposely. He was planning to get some information. Out of the corner of his eye he was watching Stanton's crippled foot. That change in position he had noticed, and the ensuing lie, had opened up various speculations.

"I see. But I don't think you need to be afraid of that. Suppose we leave it that Manson, who is a valuable man to us and who wants to keep his job for personal reasons, becomes a figure-head and that you go ahead and hire a man that suits you as soon as possible, at our expense."

"And suppose I refuse to do that?"

"Don't be unreasonable. I think you'll do it."

Rex was aware of the unreasonableness of his attitude, but his supposed fear of sabotage from Manson was a sufficient peg to hang his objections on.

"For the reasons stated, I will not have Manson in any capacity whatever nor fly a ship while he is connected with it in any way," he said coolly.

Stanton leaned back and put the tips of his fingers together. He was like an actor playing a part before an imaginary audience.

"Mr. Lee, you are a man we do not want to lose. In our—er—business, we hate to lose good men, and at the same time we must know enough about them to know that they are—er—reliable," he said in that husky voice of his.

"We—er—took the liberty of investigating you somewhat more fully than you were perhaps aware of, and we found out so much that I believe you will reconsider your determination to—er—either leave the show or insist too strongly—"

"What did you find out?" inquired Rex evenly.

"A little matter connected with Mr. Thayer in San Antonio, and the transportation of smuggled drugs—"

"I see."

Rex blew a smoke ring and watched it for a moment.

"I don't know how you found that out, I'm sure," he lied. "But it seems you've got hold of something that might embarrass me. However, just to tell *you* something—listen: a friend of mine once made a bet he could pick up a sleeping rattler by the tail and kill him. He was over-confident, you see. The snake was somewhat more wakeful than he looked, I guess. Anyway, he got into action before he got bumped off. Get me? Well, you hear me rattle now. I can do damage if I have to. I don't want to. But if you think that because

you've learned enough about me to give you a hold on me I won't rear and kick if I don't get all that's coming to me, you're wrong. That little matter of the drugs be hanged, if I'm not getting mine. So long as I get my just slice of whatever I engage in, I'm satisfied."

Stanton, hunched down in his chair, was watching the lanky flyer with a hint of interest in his expressionless eyes.

"Certainly, Mr. Lee, certainly. Don't think I was insinuating that because of this—er—regrettable incident we were planning to take advantage of you. In the matter of Manson, as I said—"

"I'll yield to you there, mostly because it's too small a matter to fight about, under the circumstances." Rex was making a retreat which would appear to be with honor, and yet to be the result of his knowledge that they were familiar with a past indiscretion as well. He wanted Stanton to think he was frightened, and yet defiant. "I think we can do business all right."

"I think so," smiled Stanton urbanely.

"Speaking of business," pursued Rex, "judging by the few lonesome people here

today, there won't be very much for me."

"This is unusual," Stanton explained. "Because there is no fair here. This week is just a fill-in for us. Business will pick up later in the week, too. From now on we have a succession of county fairs and expositions, and business will be excellent, I'm sure."

Rex got up.

"Well, good night! I'll use Manson for a few days."

"You won't have to bother with Manson long, perhaps," remarked Stanton huskily. "He's a simple man, Manson. He is jealous of his position. He enjoys being somewhat the buckaroo among the men of the carnival, and to drop from his high estate would be a severe blow. But as I say, maybe a way will be found whereby he may cease to trouble us."

Rex flashed a glance at him as he went out. Taking into account Manson's bullying tactics of the afternoon, and some subtle inflection in that cultivated voice, he felt that there was something sinister in Stanton's words.

"I don't quite believe I'd have played my hand as strong as Manson did," mused the flyer. "Those *hombres* are bad to fool with."

CHAPTER VIII

REX SAVES A MAN

At ten o'clock Wednesday morning the ship was ready for its test flight. Rex was sitting nonchalantly on top of the fuselage, treating himself to a cigaret before going up. He was likewise trying to convince himself that he had left out nothing in his recent inspection of the ship. The motor had warmed up perfectly, and he had looked over every conceivable nut, bolt and wire. And yet he had a feeling that the trip before him might hold an unusual element of danger.

In an effort to overlook no bets whatsoever, he had hit upon a plan which would prevent Manson's or anyone's else tinkering with the ship without his knowledge. He had caused strict orders to be issued that no one was to go near the ship in his absence. Inasmuch as Levin issued the order, it would undoubtedly be obeyed. He had also impressed the fact on Manson that he was in no sense an exception.

Manson had readily assured him that the rule was all right with him.

Then the flyer proceeded to set a trap. He had carefully raked the ground around the ship until it was in a condition where any footprint would be apparent. He had succeeded in accomplishing this both nights so that he was unobserved. He remembered Nan Barrett's repeated warnings against Manson, and he was beginning to believe that she was trying her best to be his friend, at least.

And this morning there had been the mark of shoes around the ship. Furthermore, they had been men's shoes, smaller and more neat than the brogans worn by Manson or any ordinary carnival employee. And last, and most important, some of the tracks angled inward, and there were cane marks. Beyond the shadow of reasonable doubt, they were Stanton's footprints. And another thing which caused Rex's eyes to narrow and his lips to curve was the fact that some of the tracks showed that the one foot did not always angle inward. Stanton had visited the ship sometime during the night, and Stanton was certainly not a cripple.

What had been his object? Rex was positive that the ship, as it stood, was in flying condition. And Stanton would have no motive in trying to fix things so that he, Rex, would be killed—rather the other way. It was undoubtedly just a visit of curiosity, and Stanton, of course, would feel himself immune from orders of any kind. But why come at night?

It might be something to do with Manson, and yet Rex could imagine nothing of that kind. Tampering with the ship would not do Manson any damage. And the ship, he was certain, had not been tampered with.

He strove to think of any means whereby his real purpose in joining the carnival could have been detected. There was nothing incriminating in his trunk, and furthermore it had been disturbed but once. He decided that there was no need of considering that phase of the subject. As additional proof, Nan had told him the night before, when she had joined him on a tour of the carnival, that both Stanton and Levin were very glad that Rex had joined the show.

He threw his cigaret away impatiently.

"Well, let's start her," he said to Manson,

who was taking his ease at full length on the ground.

Manson got to his feet, and his chief climbed into the cockpit. He turned on the gas petcock, saw with a glance that the switch was off, and called—

"Off!"

Manson spun the propeller, and shouted—

"Contact!"

"Contact!" repeated Rex, and snapped on the switch.

As the powerful Manson spun the propeller again the pilot jazzed the throttle, and the hundred and sixty horsepower motor caught. It idled along gently, and the gauges jumped. Oil stood at forty pounds, air pressure at three, and the thermometer at sixty-five centigrade. The effect of the previous warm-up had not yet worn off, so the thermometer lost no time in getting up to eighty degrees.

Rex slowly increased the speed of the motor —it was one of the types which had won its spurs over the lines—and listened to the hum of the cylinders with strained attention. It fired perfectly on either magneto, and ran with a marked absence of vibration.

He slowed it down to idling gradually, to avoid fouling the spark plugs, and nodded to Manson, who crawled under the wings and kicked the blocks from the wheels.

Rex put on a pair of goggles, not bothering with a helmet, and took a look to make sure that all was clear ahead. He noticed the carnival people climbing out of the gaudily painted cars to watch.

It was not a bad place for a take-off. The midway paralleled the southern stretch of the race-track, in the center of which he was, and ahead of him was the low inner rail of the track, then the outer rail, followed by a short, rough field and then the high fence surrounding the grounds. This fence itself was frail, and if necessary, the ship could burst through it without particular damage to the pilot.

Rex fed the throttle slowly, his hand pressed forward on the stick, and in a moment the sturdy craft had flattened itself with tail in the air and was trundling across the even terrain at sixty miles an hour. A hundred yards from the first fence it was off the ground, flying level a foot above the earth. Rex lifted it smoothly across the fences, held it level for a

moment to pick up speed, and then hurdled the boundary fence in a graceful arc with speed to spare.

He wasted no time in turning back toward the field, in the event that the perfectly functioning motor should miss. The tachometer showed sixteen hundred revolutions, and he throttled to fifteen hundred.

Three circles of the field told him all he wanted to know. He had apparently done an excellent job on the rigging, for barring slight left wing heaviness, the Jenny purred along with vibrationless smoothness. Higher and ever higher it went, until the altimeter showed three thousand feet.

Then, partly for his own satisfaction and partly for the effect on those onlookers below, Rex proceeded to "strut his stuff" in the air. He pressed forward on the stick until the motor was roaring like mad and the struts quivered and the wires shrilled a protest. He pulled back smoothly, and the ship swept upward in a wide, graceful curve.

There was not a miss in the motor as the Jenny went on its back and then swooped downward—Rex had flown his loop without the

semblance of a stall at the top. As the ship righted itself he used the extra speed for two fast barrel-rolls that sent the ship corkscrewing through the air in continuous horizontal turns. Then a quick pull-back, and as the ship, nose in the air, stalled, a thrust at the rudder caused it to fall off sideward. No sooner had it started than he gave it opposite rudder, and the nose whirled upward and over on the other side. The ship had turned on its tail in a perfect pinwheel. Time after time he did that—it was a falling leaf, refined into a wonderfully effective and very beautiful bit of aerial acrobatics.

Rex's famous upside-down work—upside-down rolls, rolls-and-a-half, and dives—were impossible with the ship he was in, due to lack of power. But all that the training plane could do, and more than most pilots would have thought it capable of doing, it went through. There was a smoothness about it that made it seem as though some living creature of the upper air was lazily enjoying itself playing about in the sky. The motor alternately increased and decreased its roar, so gradually that it seemed always to be working easily, and

the ship curved and twisted apparently in unextended ease.

At a thousand feet, Rex sent it into a two-turn tailspin and brought it out at five hundred feet. He circled over the town, where the streets were thickly sprinkled with motionless onlookers, and gave them a chance to read the big-lettered sign on the lower wings. Then he swept around a few hundred yards west of the fairgrounds, and straightened out for his landing. As the nosed-down plane dived for the field his hand gradually drew the throttle back. The perfect judgment of speed, distance and diving angle showed plainly as the shining craft dropped over the fence and hit the ground smoothly less than fifty yards from the obstacle. It stopped rolling with space to spare.

Stanton, Levin, and two other men, who later proved to be in charge of the rides and tent-shows, respectively, were waiting by the canvas hangar as he taxied up to it. Rex could see Manson's grin and his shining eyes as he grabbed one wing to turn the ship. The pilot turned off the gas petcock and let the motor run itself out before snapping off the switch.

"Awful pretty work, sir!" said Manson, a new respect in his voice.

Rex received the admiring comments of the other men, and then said:

"Contract all set?"

"Sure!" said Levin. "Any time you say."

"In place of carrying passengers this afternoon we want you to make a trip over to Brandon and Shelby, two towns that you can cover in a fifty-mile circle," said Stanton, leaning heavily on his cane. "Manson can go with you and shower both towns with some circulars we've got ready. It'll pay you good dividends for the time lost in increased patronage later on in the week. If you could do the same stunts, too—"

"I guess that could be arranged. Ship seems to be O. K. as soon as I get rid of a little wing-heaviness on the left side," returned Rex.

"Don't stunt over town," barked Levin. "Just outside o' town like you did here's just as good, and there ain't no chance o' doin' any damage if something goes flooey. Get me? Don't want lawsuits."

"That's sense," nodded Rex.

"Glad we got you," Levin went on tersely.

"Eller couldn't stunt. Great advertising in you every way. We'll give you three dollars a ride instead o' two and a half. All right?"

"Fine, thanks!"

"Take off about one o'clock this afternoon?" asked Stanton, his manner and voice a startling change from Levin's quick, clipped words and harsh voice.

"O. K!"

At one o'clock, with Manson in the back seat armed with advertising circulars, they were on their way to Brandon, twelve miles from Parkerton. The rough, rolling country showed not the slightest sign of a landing field for nearly ten minutes. Rex kept a watchful eye on the ground below, for he was one of those flyers who do not like to waste a minute in case of an emergency. He always knew exactly what clearing he was going to head for if the motor should fail.

As Brandon came in sight ahead he saw several small fields which were possibilities for a landing, and relaxed in his seat. He was wearing a helmet this trip, and in one corner of his mouth an unlighted cigaret. He circled over the little town once, to make sure that

people were watching, and then pointed for the edge of town. As they came over open fields he turned in his seat and looked at Manson.

With his right hand he signified that he was going to loop. Manson nodded, his ruddy face a bit pale. Rex judged that very little stunting had been incorporated in Manson's short experience.

Rex handled a ship as instinctively as he handled the muscles of his body. In idle curiosity he continued to sit sidewise in the seat, his head turned to watch how Manson would take the loop. They were a safe twenty-five hundred feet high.

He nosed down, judging the amount of speed instinctively, and grinned reassuringly at the Irishman, who was rigid in the rear cockpit. Still watching him, his hand drew the stick back slowly, and in a moment the ship was curving over on its back.

The upside-down position felt as natural to Rex as though the ship were roaring along level. A hundred times he had watched a cadet around a loop, alert for any signs of panic. They sometimes grabbed the stick in the backseat when they found themselves upside down.

And never, to his dying day, could he think of the events of the next few seconds without a deep feeling of thankfulness that he had watched Manson.

Just as the Jenny was falling over on its back he saw Manson's face blanch, and through the parted lips a scream of terror cut into the roar of the motor. The mechanic grabbed at the cowling as his body started leaving the plane, but too late.

Rex, partially turned in the seat with his right arm resting on the cowling, did not consciously realize what was happening. His arm shot out just in time to grasp one clawing hand. With a grip of steel his fingers closed on a big wrist. With the plane upside down, he twisted himself cruelly, and in a daze his other hand came to the rescue just before the terrible strain of Manson's full weight dragged at him.

Rex was accustomed to flying emergencies, but the next few seconds were like some horrible dream. The ship, out of control, hung on its back. With the strain of Manson's body almost pulling his right arm out of joint, Rex kept his head and with his feet kicked back at the stick. The earth was a reeling, drunken

panorama, and that terrible weight was rapidly getting the better of his strength.

With a gasp of relief he felt the ship staggering out of the loop, rudderless and swaying from side to side. Manson's body, held close to the ship because the mechanic had succeeded in catching one foot beneath the cowling, swung forward, half-sliding, half in the air, and the force of it knocked Rex forward. One knee hooked itself around his neck, and then his grasp on the man's wrist was torn loose as Manson clawed for a hold on the side of the cockpit.

The ship was diving with tremendous speed now and Rex, his head pulled backward by Manson's leg-grip until he could not see anything but the upper center section, found the stick and rudder and brought the ship level by flying sense alone.

He cut the throttle and yelled:

"Get back in the seat!"

The sudden peace of softly idling motor and gradually diving ship seemed heavenly. Bit by bit Manson got back in the seat. Below there was a level close-cropped field which looked like a good landing field. Without hesi-

tation Rex, diving very gradually, circled it and decided to land.

Had Manson's belt come unloosened, or had the man been fool enough to forget to belt himself? Or did those footprints of the night before mean anything? The pilot got control of himself and tried to think connectedly and coolly. He looked around at Manson.

Never did he remember having seen a face so demoniacal as the countenance that met his eyes. The big fellow was trembling like a leaf, and the full face seemed flabby and pasty. But behind the goggles those little eyes were the eyes of a man gone amuck. Manson's ham-like hands were grasping the cowling until the knuckles were white, and there was tenseness in every line of his body.

Rex dropped his ship over the fence in a stall landing, and found that the field was as good as he thought. No sooner had he touched the ground than two great hands closed around his throat.

"Now, hang you—" came an animal-like snarl.

For a moment Rex was so surprised that he could only gasp and try to think.

The ship was slowing to a stop, turning slightly, and he mechanically gave it rudder to keep it straight. Then he came to himself with a snap. He was being choked to death.

His body twisted and his hand tore at the fingers around his throat. Manson's convulsed face was close to his now, and animal-like grunts and snarled words came to his roaring ears. The pilot's mind cleared, and in a flash his right hand found the fire-extinguisher on the front cowling.

With all the force he could master in the narrow space he brought the filled metal cylinder back and succeeded in connecting forcefully with his assailant's head. With the last remnants of his strength he hit again, and the cruel fingers around his throat relaxed.

He unsnapped the belt and twisted free. Just in time he ducked a terrible blow that sprawled Manson over the narrow strip of cowling between the two seats. A straight jab to the man's unprotected jaw gave him a respite sufficient to get out of the cockpit and on the ground to meet the next assault. If ever he had seen murder in a man's eyes it was in Manson's.

"What the devil's the matter with you?" he shouted. "Wait a—"

"Wait for nothin'!" bellowed the infuriated mechanic, and vaulted over the side of the rear cockpit.

Rex waited not on the order of his fighting. Before Manson had regained his balance Rex had him flat on the ground with a dexterous combination of tripping and neck-hold. For a moment he had to devote his whole attention to holding the wriggling bulk below him. Finally the gasping Irishman ceased his abortive efforts, but the bloodshot eyes burned up into the cool gray ones above with undiminished fury.

"Now what's the idea?" queried Rex with a menacing edge to his voice.

"Tried to dump me, you double-crosser, didn't yuh?" snarled Manson. "So help me, if ever I git up I'll kill yuh with my bare hands! You—"

Rex shut off the flow of words by the simple procedure of using his elbow as a gag.

"I don't blame you for not being able to think *much,* but you ought to be able to use what few brains you've got," he announced

coldly. "Who had his arm pulled out of the socket holding you in, you poor dumb-bell? What was the matter—belt come loose?"

For a moment Manson, drawing in great gulps of air, did not answer. His red-streaked eyes flamed up into Rex's, and gradually some of the animal madness died out of them. The man had been insane with terror.

Rex, his elbow removed, said impatiently—

"Well?"

"The wire brace—it was filed off where it goes through the belt," roared Manson, working himself into a fury again. "And the man that did it—"

"Sure, you want to kill him. Do you now have a faint recollection of the fact that, with all due modesty, I saved your life?"

Gradually Manson's low-working brain came to that conclusion.

"Then who done it? Hang him—"

"Are you ready to get up and act civilized?" demanded Rex.

"Yes, sir," agreed Manson sullenly.

The flyer let him up, and then said—

"I took steps to see that the footprints of anybody that came around the ship during the

night would be noticeable, and some one was there. I raked the ground smooth, and I know. However, let's have a look at that belt."

It was as Manson had said. The belt, like all of the type, was of white, strong canvas, fastening below the seat on each side. It was connected to the steel brace on the frame of the ship by a heavy wire triangle, the flat apex of which went through the opening in the steel brace and the base through the belt, which is folded over and strongly sewn around the wire.

The base of this triangle had been filed off, leaving perhaps a quarter inch on each end, just enough to hook on the belt at each end and thus give the appearance of perfect safety. By putting each end in the openings of the belt and then yanking, Rex found out that a five-pound pull would cause the two stiff wire projections to give and thus slip out of the belt, leaving it entirely unanchored on that side. It was devilish in its effectiveness and ingenuity.

The stooping, worn-out Stanton stood convicted of an attempt at murder. Those words of his about Manson not bothering them much longer had come perilously close to being the truth—and Rex himself had been in a position

where, by reason of his fight with Manson and the known bad blood between them, he would almost certainly be charged with deliberate murder if the filed wire were discovered.

"Oh, how they planned to rope and hog-tie me!" he told himself with a queer tingle running up and down his spine.

"Clever, eh?" he said slowly.

Manson wiped his beefy face with his hand.

"I—I'm sorry about grabbin' yuh, sir, but I was fair crazy."

"Now listen. From your actions yesterday, you've got something on Levin and Stanton. You talked too much. They're scared of you. And I believe they're the ones that are responsible for this!"

The shaken Manson, who was still quivering in the reaction, took time to digest this. Rex, noticing out of the corner of his eyes that there were two men approaching the ship across the next field, went to the cockpit and cut off the still idling motor. He was wondering whether it would be wise to divulge his identity to Manson after telling him what he knew about Stanton, and what he suspected about the activities of the same gentleman.

In return for this, would Manson tell him the facts on which his hold on Levin and Stanton were based, and would his information and help be valuable enough to compensate for the chance he took in letting the man in on his secret? Life itself was the stake if his judgment was wrong.

"Y' say there was footprints around the ship this mornin'?"

"Yes, and I looked over the ship from end to end before I took it up. Naturally, I didn't catch the belt. Nobody in the world could, except by being a mind-reader or by accident. And I know who those footprints belonged to!"

"Who was it?" asked Manson eagerly. His hairy hands twitched at his side.

Lee took a thoughtful moment before answering.

"Before I say any more, Manson, suppose we come to an agreement. You know now, I presume, that it's ridiculous to think I was responsible for trying to kill you. I'd have tried to dump you out in the woods somewhere, probably, and I certainly wouldn't have saved you. Agree to that?"

"Yes, sir," admitted Manson shamefacedly.

"And—and thanks, sir, for what yuh did. I know I ain't been no friend to yuh—drinkin' and all, an' then you tryin' to fire me—"

"That's all over. And you know yourself you're no darn good as a mechanic. Well, that's settled. And you agree with me that your popping off about how much you know and threatening Stanton and Levin means that in all probability they were behind this?"

"Yes, sir."

The Irishman's eyes were like pin-points, and he was following his chief's words with painful attention. The oncoming men were clambering over the fence now, so Rex said—

"Let's get away from the ship."

They walked along toward the center of the field.

"Knowing this, you agree that probably the carnival is going to be a dangerous place for you with those fellows after you, don't you?"

This was apparently a new thought to Manson.

"By the powers, yuh're right there!"

"All right then—if I should tell you that I'm after their scalps, too, would you like to help? Because the footprints around the ship were

Stanton's. That crippled foot of his showed plainly, and his cane marks."

"I thought so!" snarled Manson. "I'll settle *his* hash."

"Sure. But not right now. Are you with me in putting those birds in the jug?"

"What're *you* after?" Manson asked bluntly.

"I'm in the secret service," said Rex evenly. "And I'm planted with this outfit to get the men responsible for a series of robberies in the last few months, from Texas on up here."

"The secret service!" gasped Manson, stopping dead in his tracks.

"The secret service. And I'm trying to get the gang of criminals that are responsible for those crimes. Don't get scared—if you help out you'll be all right. I've become convinced that Stanton is probably the big chief. But right now I haven't got enough on him to make a move—not definite enough. I want to get him and anybody else in on it *with the goods.* It might be a—hard job to convict him of anything through a set of footprints and with no evidence but my own. That is, if he's as clever as I think he is.

"Here's my scheme. I could get you right now—I've got a gun in my pocket. And you don't know how many secret agents there are around that show, and how quick they'd jump if *anything* happened to me. So don't try to fool with me."

"It don't need no friends to keep me from that, sir. I ain't forgettin' you been square—"

"I'm not afraid of a double cross from you, Manson. Now suppose we work together. First, you tell me all you know about this outfit. Then we go back as though nothing had happened. You go to Stanton and Levin and tell them that you discovered that filed brace wire at the start of the trip, and held yourself in the ship, being warned ahead of time by your knowledge.

"Pretend you're convinced I was responsible for filing the wire, and that you want to get me, see? And then say that this morning I was talking about slipping away from the show—that I'd told too much, and that when a man's past career was known to his boss that it was time for him to get out, unless there's big money in sight, see? You don't know just why I tell you to say that, but I'll explain later.

If they think I'm considering leaving on account of their knowing so much about me and my dissatisfaction with prospects of making big money, it may work out into two things—they'll try to work me into some big dough, to keep me, because I'm valuable to 'em, and they may let up on you because you're a substitute flyer and they'll figure that you'd be a good man to get rid of me if I needed bumping off through getting too gay.

"However, you can play safe just the same—don't get into any dark places late at night and keep a sharp watch out generally. We'll be forewarned about any further attempts on the ship by the same method I've been using."

He went on to explain the planted letter in his trunk, purporting to show that he had run afoul of the law before, and bit by bit, sitting on the ground, the slow-witted Irishman took in the various facets to the situation.

"Now what do you know that you're so proud of?" demanded Rex.

"Well, sir, it ain't so much when you come to think of it definite-like," admitted Manson. "But then it's something! Eller was an officer o' the Air Service in the same outfit I

was supply sergeant of. Well, he got in some trouble sellin' Army stuff, and I helped 'im out—I could, you see, bein' supply sergeant—so's all he had to do was resign, see, instead o' getting court-martialed. He having been in this carnival business before, and me too, kinda brought us together.

"Well, this show was winterin' in San Antone and him and me got thinkin' and suggested this airplane idee to 'em. Then we found they was all primed for it beforehand, and was lookin' for a flyer that suited. Well, Eller suited, bein' a natural-born crook, I suppose. And naturally he took me, as mechanic, and kept teachin' me flyin' while the show was still winterin'.

"You know as much as I do about them robberies, so all I can say is that every time one o' them robberies was pulled in the town where we was the plane left right away, carryin' some bird that was a stranger to us but corresponded to the description of one o' the crooks, see? And in the case of them jobs that was pulled in near-by towns, the ship was always somewheres a few miles from town. Once it brought back a stranger, and Eller says later

they'd flown over another town near a hundred miles away and dropped a package—the swag, I'll bet—to some bird in a field there. The other time it brings back old Stanton himself. They dropped somethin' in another town that time too."

"Just about what I thought," said Rex slowly, his eyes on the small knot of people who were gathered around the plane. "Were all these 'strangers' different, or did you ever see the same man twice?"

"One feller was around twice—the rest was all different."

"I see. And Stanton and Levin know that you have connected up these trips of the plane with the robberies, and that's what enabled you to get away with holding 'em up, eh?"

"Yes, sir. You see, Eller tells 'em I got to be in on it, so's I can take his place if anything happens and all that stuff. He was primin' me and them to have two ships, see?"

"Very plainly. And how is it that the rest of the show doesn't connect up the airplane with those robberies?"

"Too dumb, and besides they ain't got any basis, see? The ship is always goin' out over

other towns for advertisin' generally a trip or so a day. There ain't nothin' unusual in the ship leavin' and comin' back any time. Course, everybody knows the mob that follows the show—these here cheap grifters that you ain't seen work yet—and they figure the robberies is pulled by some o' them or by outsiders that's using the carnival as a blind, see? There ain't nobody connects up Stanton or anybody with 'em. These strangers just slipped in the grounds and into the plane without anybody noticin' anything."

"What about this man with the scar—this great big fellow, sort of stout and tall, with a scar on his chin? Ever seen him?"

"No, sir! And Eller didn't know nothin' about him, neither. That's somethin' nobody ain't in on. This bird must be good!"

"And no airplane getaway, either," mused Rex thoughtfully.

"How much did Stanton and Levin ever directly admit to Eller? That is, did they tell 'im in so many words his trip was to help a crook make a get-away, drop the loot, and so forth?"

"No, sir. He was just told where to be and what to do, and he gets two hundred a trip and I get fifty to keep our mouths shut. Nobody around the show ever seen any o' these strange passengers. Course, Eller and me knew what was comin' off, and those bozos knew we knew, but now that it's all over, yuh see, how are these fellers gonna be caught? The passengers can't be produced. Eller says there's always some scheme at the other end—land in some lonesome spot and a automobile all ready and that stuff—so's the chances are this bird just disappears."

"Well, we'd better get back and take off. Where are those circulars we were going to distribute?"

"Under the seat. I don't believe they got dumped out. You ain't gonna stunt no more—"

"No," grinned Rex. "But we can fix that belt with some rope."

While a growing knot of interested people watched, and asked questions, they used some safety wire in the tool-kit to fix the belt, and cranked the motor. Within a few minutes they

were on their way. The small circulars had not been lost, and they covered the two towns with a rain of paper.

Rex, lounging loosely in the front seat and flying mechanically, was busy fitting all the facts at his disposal into a unified whole. That night he wrote Service a long letter, telling him how things stood in detail.

"It's a great mess. And Stanton, who without question is the 'Master Mind' as we detectives say, we've got in the salubrious state where he thinks he knows it all while really he knows nothing. Levin, I believe, is just a practical carnival man with a split on the proceeds, but confining his professional attention to running the show. Stanton, as I said, thinks he has a club over my head, and really he has not; and he thinks that Manson thinks I am trying to kill him, and that I'm ignorant of the attempt on Manson's life. If I make a mistake playing the cards, I wouldn't give a piece torn off the corner of a Russian ruble for my neck.

If I play them right, we ought to have them dead to rights.

"As for the prominent big fellow with the scar who is robber-in-chief of this bunch, under Stanton's direction, nobody knows anything about him. However, when the first job breaks, I'll try to catch him. It might be a good thing to look up Stanton if any of your agents can do it. He used to be an actor, as I said, and he's fairly tall, so stooped he seems almost hump-backed, has that fake crippled foot, which still puzzles me, because I believe it is a fake, and is bald. Probably he was an actor under a different name.

"As I said, it must be that Schrader spies out the land, but maybe not in a way that makes him criminally liable. Sounds things, see what I mean? If I were you and had nothing more important to do, I'd be in town when we get in next Sunday for the fair. Manson says the rumor is that 'the mob's on the loose,' next week, which they are not here, and from a hint or two Stanton has dropped I believe there

may be a big job on for our attention likewise."

Rex finished the letter, sealed and addressed it, and prepared to go uptown to mail it. In his contented moments he was addicted to the more spacious methods of speech to express his ideas, and now he said, half-aloud:

"Attempting the divulgement of illegal machinations is evidently a profession infested with interest. Now if next week proves up—"

CHAPTER IX

REX HESITATES

At five o'clock the next Saturday afternoon Rex and Manson were winging their way over lofty wooded mountains, following the snake-like course of a river, toward a town called Valley. He was armed with a crude map of the fairgrounds, which the indefatigable Schrader had furnished, together with the information that the fair committee had ruled that there would be no parking of automobiles within the limits of the track, and that therefore a good landing-place right in the center of things was available.

The days since his conversion of Manson had been uneventful, compared to the first days of his connections with the Levin-Willet shows, but far from uninteresting. He had two opportunities to talk with Manson, and both conversations were illuminating, particularly the one concerning Nan Barrett.

Having nothing in particular to do, Rex had

formed the habit of lounging around the midway in the evening, seeing what he could see. Invariably the little stenographer had joined him. Those numerous games where, for a dime, one was sure to get some prize and was inveigled into believing that one of the more valuable exhibits might come one's way, she told him would change next week to games where there was but one winning number, and the losers got nothing.

Most of them would change to straight money prizes, and every wheel would be supplied with an automatic control, worked from under the booth by the operator's foot, so that the chance of winning on any but the smallest played numbers would be slight. The drop-case, the spot-the-spot, the set-spindle—he grew to know them all. There were numberless variations.

Rex decided, however, as they trooped around the show, that Miss Barrett, very unobtrusively, was trying to pump him. It was not at all obvious, and probably meant nothing, but she seemed trying to account for Rex's presence with the show. She had suggested that he might be a writer looking for local

color, but he had laughed and always made the same reply—that he was there to make money. As to his past life and future plans, he was very vague.

It was Manson who had made him eternally thankful that he had not made her a confidant. For Manson had said:

"I ain't tryin' to butt in none, but some one was tellin' me that you and Nan Barrett have been around together quite some bit."

"Why yes, she's been pretty friendly, and told me a lot of stuff about these gyp joints," returned Rex.

"Why, I just wanted to give yuh a steer," said Manson hesitatingly. "She's a dangerous crook around the show."

"How do you know?"

"Oh, I know all right," Manson looked up quickly. "Been kind of curious, has she?"

"Well, now that you mention it—"

"Thought so," nodded Manson, very much pleased with his own acuteness. "You ain't told her nothin'?"

"Not a thing important."

"Ain't slipped no hints about somethin' mysterious or nothin'?" persisted Manson.

"No."

"Good. All she is is a come-on for Stanton. That's just another way he's usin' to see whether you're O. K.," stated Manson positively. "Eller an' I went through somethin' the same when we joined."

And thereafter Rex had been doubly careful. He congratulated himself on the fact that he had not given the girl the slightest opening. It had been a surprise to him to get that angle on her—she was a good actress. Manson had expatiated on her professional skill and criminal proclivities.

"One o' the slickest badger-game women and blackmail artists in captivity," he had said. "She ain't needin' to work now, but it's ten to one she's in on this game—her bein' in the office and all."

In another conversation Manson had urged him, if possible, to get into the privilege car when some townsmen of Valley were entertained.

"The word's gone out that the town is all right and that the mob'll be on the loose," he said. "That means Schrader has got 'em figured and that they'll stand a little easin' o' the

itch in their palms or somethin' like that. There'll be some police an' others—anyone Schrader has figured can protect us—invited down to a dinner or somethin' and the booze'll flow free. You may be able to get in on it, an' it may show you somethin'. You're valuable t' the show, and might get away with it."

Rex was now certain of his value to the show. His name, picture and record had been spread in the Parkerton papers, and as a result he had done a very satisfactory business the last three days—his personal share had been over thirty dollars a day. And he knew that special placards had been prepared for Valley.

It rubbed him the wrong way to be a publicity feature of that kind, but it seemed necessary. He had carried out his part by kicking against the amount of money he was making, appearing dissatisfied that something bigger wasn't brewing, and Stanton told him, in that gentle way of his:

"You won't kick on next week's proceeds. There'll be plenty of passengers, and maybe a side trip that will mean a couple of hundred."

"What kind of trip?" Rex had asked interestedly.

"Oh, just a trip," the man had replied with a slow smile, and Rex had nodded satisfiedly.

"I'm not curious if there's two hundred in it," he had said.

He had become more and more certain that the rank and file of the show had no idea whatever of the undercurrent of important crimes. He had spent hours listening to the liquor-loosened tongues in the privilege car of a morning, and lain around with groups of carnival people after meals, listening to their casual conversation. Narrow escapes from the law, the revealing, by accident or otherwise, of certain fake freaks like the "half-woman," and the quick breaks out of towns before the powers of the law got busy—of such things was their conversation woven.

It was interesting, in more ways than one, to get the viewpoint of these squalid denizens of the lowest form of show business. There was only one creed—to get away with all they could and be safe.

Famous short-changers, three-card monte men, ingenious new methods of inveigling the people into parting with their money without getting a run for it, that wonderful "mob"

which had cleaned up for two years with the Jacot-Brady Shows and made themselves and the owners rich by advanced pocket-picking, safe-breaking, burglary and confidence workers—Rex now had a speaking acquaintance with all these legendary heroes of the gentle art of buncombe.

He came out of his reverie as he saw a long bridge across the river. The second bridge, according to his map, should lead into Valley. He was flying below the level of the towering mountains, straight down the river valley. It increased the distance, but the only possible landing-fields were along the river-bank, and Rex was far too much of a veteran to waste his limited chances of beating the game of the air on avoidable risks.

The ship roared around a sharp curve of the river, and not more than a hundred feet to the left a jutting cliff projecting from the side of the mountains gave the passengers an idea of the speed of the ship.

Valley burst into view as they rounded the rock abutment. The foot-hills did not commence until nearly two miles from the river, and on that small plain sprawled a sizable little

city, surrounded by small but level fields which broke up into mere clearings as they reached the edge of the rolling low-lands.

The fairgrounds stuck out of the picture like a sore thumb. The oval track gleamed white as snow against the green of its center, and a long row of barns formed part of the northern boundary of the grounds.

There were several large frame buildings, clustered a short distance from the southern end of the track, and there were already a great many shacks and tents which undoubtedly housed concessions independent of the carnival. There were many roads, continuations of streets of the town, which led by fairly direct routes to the fairgrounds. It was a smiling scene, and one of ant-like industry, for there were many vehicles going to and from the scene of the fair, and the grounds themselves were occupied by a myriad scurrying specks of black figures.

Gradually these specks became more quiet as the ship came overhead. Rex half through his feeling of satisfaction and content and half for the advertising, gave them a treat. He stunted down to a thousand feet in a bewildering con-

coction of spins, rolls, loops and sudden reversements which left Manson, in the rear, looking white and sick.

At a thousand feet the flyer throttled the motor and circled in a shallow dive. There was one ditch which ran in a jagged line diagonally across the short way of the oval, petering out perhaps half-way to the other fence. A much-worn path splitting the oval squarely in half was etched plainly. To make absolutely certain of his terrain he side-slipped down, straightened out, and sped across the prospective landing field barely a foot off the ground. The path was not a depression, and by landing diagonally he could escape that ditch.

The approaches were only fair. The high buildings at the southern point of the track were scarcely a hundred yards from the track itself, and on the other end just outside the boundary fence itself and perhaps less than seventy-five yards from the track there were high wires. Landings and take-offs must be made toward the buildings, with a quick turn right off the ground on a take-off to straighten the ship for open spaces at each end of the

row of buildings. West of the track was the midway, or what would be the midway when the carnival arrived. The railroad siding was on that side.

Rex half-circled, well back of the wires and three hundred feet high, and then in a shallow, widely curving dive straightened his ship to land toward the buildings, headed almost parallel to the ditch. By this method the ship's roll took it just beyond the end of the little gully, which was deep enough to have turned it over.

"Stake it down and don't get far away from it," Rex told Manson.

"I'll be right on the job!" stated Manson, who was feeling very contented with himself. A man who traveled from town to town by air surely became a personage to the crowd which would shortly surround the ship, and also got prestige among the members of the carnival crew.

He helped Rex unwire his suit-case, which operation was completed before the advance guard of spectators arrived.

A stout, moon-faced man with a merry eye and a nose which bloomed in a bright shade

of crimson that harmonized with the pink of his face, came up to them at a half-trot, escorted by several other men who wore badges.

"This is Lieutenant Lee, I suppose," he puffed, wiping a totally bald head with a drenched handkerchief and smiling until his eyes were closed by rolls of fat. "I'm Framer, Fair Secretary."

Rex admitted his identity, shook hands with the various fair officials, who wore ornate badges, and submitted to a close inspection without protest.

"Glad you're here, sir!" declared Framer in his wheezy, throaty voice. "I trust you will find it worth your while, too. I have a brother who was a flyer in France during the war. You'll have to meet him. This gentleman here," pointing to a long-haired, wild-eyed youth who had just arrived, "is a representative of the *Bugle,* our local paper. Hope you'll give him some stuff—good publicity for the fair and for you."

Rex swallowed his abhorrence and gave the reporter an outline of his career, an estimate of the future of air travel, and further statements as to the safety of all passengers who

rode with him. This being over he accepted the rotund Framer's offer to transport himself and his suit-case to the hotel, where Framer assured him that a room had been reserved for him as a result of a wire for one night's reservation.

Rex declined an invitation to spend the evening with the Fair Secretary.

"I've been flying all day, and am tired as a badger," he apologized. "Some other night—tickled to death!"

As he registered he cast his eye over the signatures before his own and found that Service was in 431. The curious eyes of the lobby-loungers followed his khaki form as he went to the elevator. His identity was evidently well-known in Valley, and a poster hung up by the elevator indicated the cause of his fame.

There was a picture of him in full uniform, and a flamboyant summary of his record, together with the information that he would carry passengers all that week at the fair. The poster, in a manner of speaking, possessed neither well-bred reserve nor the shrinking modesty of the violet. It came out boldly and admitted that the greatest flyer in the country

would condescend to carry aspiring Valleyites heavenward.

Rex changed his clothes and in ordinary civilian attire knocked on the door of 431. The next instant he was shaking hands with the chubby Service.

"Well, you've sure been burning up the road," Tom assured him. "How do you like your job?"

"It's a right copious position, this sleuthing," returned Rex.

"Anything new?"

"Not much."

"Spin me the yarn!" commanded Tom as Rex started a cigaret on its way back to ashes.

Rex spun obediently. It was a relief to talk freely—not until that moment had he fully realized the constant strain he had been under in his efforts to anticipate every possible contingency and to navigate squarely in the middle of his perilous path.

Service sat motionless, his round, innocent-looking eyes burning through the glasses as he concentrated every faculty on Rex's story. He asked many questions, some of them seemingly irrelevant and Rex could see, as plainly as

though Service's thoughts had been pictured on a screen, how the man was fitting every detail into place, sorting and choosing and pigeon-holing them in that remarkable mind of his.

"That's all there is, there is not another bit," Rex concluded.

"And a sight more than I hoped for as soon in my wildest dreams, Rex," said Service absently.

"Stanton the real power and brains, Levin in on it, this chirruping chickabiddy Barrett, likewise, and Schrader almost certainly," Service summed up. "They import some expert for a few hours, and then whisk him away by airplane, getting rid of the swag either by letting this bird take it with him, or dropping it to a confederate a long way from where it was obtained, and within an hour or two. Stanton, an ex-actor, suspected of faking a crippled foot, Rex that may be and probably is a false lead. The fact that the foot isn't always in that unnatural position may not mean a thing except that he has some slight movement of it."

"Seemed to happen once when he was off

guard and another time when he was alone," stated Rex.

"And the man with a scar is still a mystery," ruminated Service. "In every robbery they had a few minutes, at least, for a getaway, which makes the scheme watertight, so far as the accomplice is concerned. He flits in and out of town within a few minutes. And the big man has a few minutes to disappear, which he does with neatness and dispatch. He doesn't have a chance to leave town—or didn't in at least one case, and yet he can't be found. That means, to my mind—"

Rex waited to see what Service would make of the problem. He had a far-fetched solution himself, but he wanted Service to present an independent surmise without being influenced by his own.

Tom, however, did not pursue his line of thought further.

"I believe your scheme is perfect," he said at last. "Wait until this trip comes off this week. You let me know where it's going to be and I'll be there. Whenever you get there, with or without my help, take quick action against whoever your passenger is and search

him. If it's the usual thing, we'll have one criminal and the swag.

"Then, working from there, pick up the man that the swag's to be dropped to, if that's the scheme in this case; have other men waiting to grab Levin and your Fancy Nan Barrett, and Schrader. I've got a man on Schrader now. He's a keen egg, this press agent, advance man or whatever he's called, but we have nothing definite on him.

"He simply circulates all around town, as I suppose it is his business to do, gets acquainted with all the town officials, newspapermen, and so forth, and in general prepares the field. He also, of course, has an opportunity to figure out any chances for crooked work, but of course you can't arrest a man for what he's thinking. However, we'll grab him when the blow-off comes and he'll come clean, I'm sure."

They talked for hours, perfecting details and going over and over the ground. It was obligatory for them to proceed carefully because the skilful distribution of the loot and the details of operation indicated plainly a well-organized band which of necessity included several men, aside from those they knew.

As matters stood, Service pointed out, arrests would fall far short of real effectiveness. Iron-clad proof of any kind was lacking. How could they prove beyond the peradventure of a doubt that Levin and Stanton were behind those crimes?

The loot was missing, the men who had been spirited away were free and unknown, and practically all they had to go on was a deductive structure which, if it resulted in any conviction, would leave many criminals free and fall far short of proving the full responsibility of the gang.

"The man you had two fights with is now your aid, and the girl that was so helpful was double-crossing you," Service said with a grin. "So anything can happen to reverse the situation."

CHAPTER X

PLANS

What Rex called the ultimate uproar came three days later. Previous thereto, however, he was privileged to witness various matters which gave Service and himself a line to work on which later proved valuable.

The carnival arrived at noon on Sunday, and once again he watched the efficiency with which Levin's organization went about their work. Mindful of Manson's words a few days before, he watched the privilege car closely. At three o'clock in the afternoon he saw several men start to drift into the car, and an hour later he started for that destination himself.

He entered the car, from which sounds of hilarity had come to his ears, and hesitated.

"Beg pardon," he said, hesitatingly. "I didn't mean to—"

"Come right in!" chuckled Framer, the fair secretary, and Stanton seconded the invitation.

Stanton introduced Rex to three men, then

to several of "the boys" about the show. He was careful to expatiate on just who Rex was, and Framer, whose face was now very red and whose eyes sparkled feverishly, was an able second.

The men were introduced as the Chief of Police of Valley, a man named Devling who later proved to be a political boss of the town, and a member of the city council. Rex withdrew as quickly as possible from any prominent part in the conversation.

"Just having a little game," Stanton had told him but Rex wondered at the size of the "*little*" game when he looked at the bills and chips that were on the table. The car had been prepared, evidently, for the occasion, for it was unusually clean, there was a rug on the floor of the square at the lower end of the bar, and extra chairs. Bill, the barkeeper, dispensed drinks rapidly and without interest, and read a newspaper during his free moments.

The winnings, Rex noticed, were oddly enough all being cornered by the three strangers. He wondered what the game was, so by drinking little and keeping his eyes wide open, he was shown another trick of the "Mas-

ter Mind." He noticed that Stanton's efforts were devoted entirely to keeping things going, and that while he drank considerably he did not show the effects at all. He seemed unusually sinister and calculating as he sat back and calmly watched.

Rex was sitting facing the door at the lower end, and Bill, the barkeeper, was directly in his line of vision. Without any obvious signal, unless it was the rap of Stanton's cane on the floor, "the boys" of the carnival who were playing with the three men from Valley decided their luck was against them and to pay up. They counted out rolls of bills and as they handed the money to the individual men, Rex saw Bill swiftly pick up a large camera from beneath the bar, aim it for a second, and then snap the shutter.

Shortly afterward Rex left.

"Blackmail de luxe!" he grinned. "Not a one of those bozos knows it, either. Stanton'll fix everything with 'em, but if they get gay trying to tighten up—presto! That picture!"

Evidently the officials did not get gay, for Monday night, Rex saw the Levin-Willet shows really at work and the mob on the loose. Val-

ley was the center of a great coal-mining district, and in addition the people from all over the country seemed to be turning out for the great event of the year.

Spielers, shills, lecturers, the band; all were working at top speed. The midway was a black mass of show-loving people. The low roar of a happy crowd was split by the passionate appeals and descriptions of the spielers, and overlying that was the blare of brass and the endless screaming of the carousel calliope. Nearly all wheels were working for money now, and the law which says that every player must get some prize was violated without exception.

The "mob" worked beautifully. Rex, familiar by now with most of the operators, watched with interest. Five or six of them, working according to some hidden system of signals, would drift into the crowd and surround the victim, crushing against him from all sides. In a second his pocket was picked, the wallet passed back, and the "dip" himself free from the chance of conviction, even if he had bungled his work.

Rex went over and took a look at Lightning

Melvin, owner and ticket-seller of the freak exhibit, which was housed in a row of shielded pits holding the wild man, the bearded woman, snake charmer, and other artists. Melvin had a strong bally-hoo of two spielers, and three or four men who were laborers around the show were now engaged in hustling the crowd in. Melvin, shortchange artist of wide fame, was cleaning up. He worked so fast, talked so continuously and genially to every customer, that he was getting rich by the handful. The psychology of the whole thing was such as to induce the crowd to hurry their efforts to get in, giving Lightning a good opportunity to show his class.

Back in the privilege car two poker games and a crap game were in session, with Al Sibley, Mask Hallon and Menny Wolfe in charge, and new victims showing up every minute. Carnival employees were mixing in the crowd, shunting victims to the car, where moonshine at fifty cents a drink and gambling at a higher rate made the proceeds mount.

The "badge girls" were still cashing in, and had been ever since early afternoon. They pinned an ornate badge bearing the words

"Guest of Honor" on the coat lapel of every unattached man, collected ten cents therefor. Some vague charity was presumably the excuse for this, and the girls worked all through the grounds, their connection with the carnival not apparent. The Fair Committee, ignorant or not of the graft as the case might be, got a cent a badge as their percentage, the badges themselves cost possibly two cents, and the remaining seven was split between the girls and the carnival.

Rex's own business had flourished during the day. His share had been nearly forty dollars. And Stanton, who was in the office when the flyer checked in with Grady, the treasurer, had followed him out and said:

"Tomorrow, in the late afternoon you fly over Chidborough and Grove's Hill, and finally land at Mercer. I'll be with you. We take off in the morning at dawn—and your rake-off will be two hundred. Is that all right?"

"Suits me to a T," Rex answered, and grinned into the flabby, expressionless face with real pleasure.

"Have the ship all ready, then," said Stanton with that silky huskiness.

"There'll be no doubt of that!" Rex told himself as he walked away.

That night he slipped up town and told Service.

"I'll be there myself, with another man—Clancy. An operative'll be in tomorrow from Charleston, and he'll handle Levin and Barrett. We're lucky that Stanton himself is going."

"Uh-huh! May be a cleanup."

"You know, Rex, I've been thinking of the possibilities of what these boys have started. The time's coming when a secret service of the air, so to speak, will be a common thing. Look at the chances now! The whole air is free, unknown. Tremendous speed, secrecy, boundary lines nothing—some day somebody is going to use that in a big way!"

Service's eyes were alight as he thought of the possibilities of the future, and Rex, the veteran of the air, lapsed into short meditation. Despite the fact that he was somewhat "fed up," as he expressed it, there would always remain the pride of having been somewhat of a pioneer; that he had contributed his tiny share to the conquest of the air.

His mind looked ahead a few years to the time when huge, stately craft would sweep the sky, and a proportion of the business of the world go on in the limitless heavens. Little by little the joy of diving and zooming and twisting a little light craft that was like a part of one's self would be forgotten as the romance of the air was submerged in monotonous, safe, featureless practicality. And with the love for his job that will always remain deep in the heart of every man who has ever known the thrill that comes from being alone in the sky, master of a craft that to all practical purposes knows no limitation of dimensions or speed, he was saddened at the inevitable.

"Well, as the leading aerial detective of the Secret Service, I suggest we make sure of every move in Mercer," he said finally, coming out of his momentary trance. "I bow to your massive intellect, wide experience, and known love of talking, and give you first say."

CHAPTER XI

PREPARATION

The sun had dropped behind the towering hills next afternoon as Rex spiraled slowly down over the field at Mercer. The carnival had played there several weeks before, and Stanton had described the location to him. Alongside the level pasture a number of cars were drawn up.

They had flown over Chidborough and Grove's Hill, and Stanton had dropped the customary leaflets. The two towns were near Valley, Mercer itself close to seventy miles from the present stand of the Levin-Willet Shows. Stanton had told him, just before they left, that he was planning to stay with a friend in Mercer, but that Rex himself would stay at the hotel and that he was to be prepared to start home at dawn.

Rex wasted little time in looking over the field—it was getting dark rapidly and according to Stanton's description had proven a good

landing-place without obstacles of any kind. The pilot skimmed in over the rail fence, landed, and taxied close to the road, where several interested people were watching.

A thin little man wearing eyeglasses came up to the ship and greeted Stanton cordially. Rex ran out the motor, and then climbed out and assisted Stanton, whom he was forced to lift out bodily. Stanton leaned on him heavily until Rex had secured the cane and handed it to him.

"Mr. Granger, meet Lieutenant Lee," Stanton introduced them.

"Glad to know you, sir," said the little man, who seemed to be of middle age, and was possessed of a pair of alert brown eyes. "You certainly travel by twentieth-century methods, don't you, Stanton?"

"Saves time, and I have very little. The fair at Valley is so big it's making us all stay close to the job."

Granger, whose car was waiting, walked over to it, Stanton limping by his side. Rex, with the eager assistance of two young men, staked down the ship. Stanton had told him that it would be unnecessary to guard it.

Rex warned the onlookers that any tampering with it would be dangerous, and then unwired the suit-cases and carried them over to the car. He left the light overalls which he had been wearing over his civilian clothes, although Stanton still wore his.

Rex, at Granger's invitation, got in the car and they started for the city. Stanton removed his helmet and goggles, and put on the hat he had been carrying. Rex's own chapeau was in his suit-case, so he remained bareheaded.

As they drew up in front of an ornate small-city hotel, Stanton said, "Mr. Granger has offered to get up early and drive us to the field, so we'll call for you at six o'clock."

He went in and registered, and with a casual eye found the name Francis Clancy on the page, with the room number 303. His own room and bath was satisfactory, and was also on the third floor. As soon as he had washed up he went down to 303, knocked and was invited to enter.

"Mr. Clancy?" he asked, surveying the chunky, pleasant-faced man who was playing solitaire in his shirt sleeves.

"I'm Lee," stated the pilot, and flashed the little gold badge Service had handed over to him in Valley. Rex had not worn one heretofore because of the chance that some one in the carnival might find it and give him away.

"Glad to know you," grinned the ruddy-faced Clancy, shaking hands. "You seem to be doing pretty well for an amateur. Well, what seems to be the lay? Service told me to come here, that the same ginks that's been pullin' those other jobs were in town, and that you'd give me the dope!"

"How much do you know?"

"Everything up to now."

"Well, Stanton's spending the night, he says, with a nervous little fellow named Granger who lives here. We may have all our trouble for nothing. But then again we may not. Let's find out who Granger is."

"There's a jewelry store run by a man named Granger—right next to the hotel here. I'll be back in five minutes."

The direct Mr. Clancy was as good as his word.

"Biggest jewelry store in the city, and the description of the owner fits yours."

"Then I'm convinced there will be something doing!" said Rex, in such relieved tones that Clancy threw back his head and laughed a hearty Hibernian laugh.

"What's your advice? You're older at this game than I am," said Rex. "You know what Service and I suspect—"

"Uh-huh! I'll plank myself near the house and just watch," said Clancy. "As I understand it, the showdown comes in the morning if there's anything doing. Right?"

"Right. You'll just keep an eye on Stanton then, eh? I guess that's the only thing to do."

"Well, I'll start. You might walk around that way—clerk down here can probably tell you where Granger lives—and I'll tell you anything that comes up. If you and Service got this Stanton right, some visitors'll be comin'."

"Is Service here yet?"

"Nope—gets in at 10:22 tonight, he wired me. Well, I'll be stepping along. You'll be around that way after dinner?"

"Yes. I suppose the clerk can tell me where the house is. I'll find it, anyway."

"Have to ask directions myself. Well, see

you later," and the tranquil Clancy adjusted his natty straw hat and went out.

The clerk, it proved, knew exactly where Mr. Granger lived, and Rex started immediately after dinner. He noticed that the Granger store was closed for the day. By the illumination of one safety light that was burning he saw that it was a pretentious establishment.

The quiet residential street where Mr. Granger lived was a half-mile from the center of town—a small brick house set well back from the street and separated from its neighbors by several trees and perhaps fifty yards of lawn on each side. He kept a sharp lookout for Clancy as he strolled down the street. He finally spied him in a small drug store on a corner diagonally across from the Granger residence.

"Man went in the house about three minutes ago," Clancy told him tersely. "Found out that Granger's a bachelor and has one old nigger to look after him most of the time. There's that fellow now—and he's carrying a package!"

Without speaking they watched a short man

come out of the house, walk unhurriedly down the walk to the street, and then turn toward the center of the town.

"Let's get him," said Clancy, taking the words out of Rex's mouth.

They talked in low tones as they rapidly overtook him. They could see their quarry walking, without haste, through the dim splashes of light from the street lamps. If, as they suspected, a robbery was scheduled to take place that night, it might be at Granger's house. In that case, the man ahead might be a confederate, and that package might be interesting.

They were walking on the opposite side of the street, and after passing the man with the package they crossed over. The corner house had a considerable lawn, surrounded by a high hedge.

"We can wait here," said Clancy.

The man they were following would naturally think they had gone on down the side street. They waited quietly, invisible to him behind the barrier of shrubbery. The laugh of some children at play, farther up the street, and the foot-falls of the approaching man were all that

broke the silence. It was only a few minutes after seven o'clock, and there seemed to be nobody abroad as yet, although several porches were occupied.

In a moment, the man would reach the corner. Tense, expectant, they waited as he came near. And then he strode into view.

They stepped out from behind the hedge as the man reached the corner.

"Throw up your hands!" commanded Clancy in conversational tones, and his gun prodded into their captive's ribs. Rex's was also ready.

"Quick!"

Rex's sharp command caused the utterly dumfounded victim to drop the package and thrust his hands upward.

The flyer rapidly searched him and removed a revolver from a rear pocket. He picked up the package.

"Now take your hands down and walk down this street with us," he commanded, and showed his badge. "Secret service," he added.

"What's in that package?" demanded Clancy as they walked down the side street. Apparently the quick holdup had attracted no

attention, for the guns had been well-hidden and the man's hands had been in the air only for a moment.

"Some clothes," stammered the ferret-like little captive, his eyes darting from side to side as he licked dry lips. "What d'yuh think you're doin'?" he flamed suddenly in belated bravery.

"Shut up!" snapped Clancy, stopping his quarry in the shadow of a house. "Now we'll see what's in there."

Rex untied the package. There was a suit of dark material, heavy shoes, a black felt hat, and a black tin box which he opened.

"An actor's make-up box!" he grunted contentedly. "Now what's this? It's made of rubber—"

He shook out a sizable rubber affair and examined it.

"It can be blown up!" he said surprisedly. "And here's the bicycle pump—"

"That's how Stanton turns into a big stout man with a scar on his chin!" grinned Clancy. "See? Puts this on and blows it up to make him look big and stout, straightens out of the

slouch, puts on that wig, forgets that crippled foot—"

"The man with the scar," nodded Rex. "And here's the wig, and here's a bag."

He poured the contents of it out in his hand. The little cloth sack gave up a flashing, sparkling flow of jewels.

"Clancy, the deed's been done!"

"Got 'em!" grunted Clancy. "Those sparklers are worth something, or I ain't been catchin' jewel-thieves for twenty years. What were you going to do with this package that you were carrying? Speak up!"

He dug the cowering thief in the ribs with his gun as he spoke, to register emphasis.

"We're getting Stanton and the whole crowd," Rex told him. "You're hooked, so you might as well come clean and get off as easy as you can."

As the man hesitated Clancy thrust his face close to him and snarled suddenly—

"You talk, or by—"

The crook decided that discretion was the better part of valor. These agents must have had detailed knowledge of the plot, or they

would never have been on the job and apprehended him.

"I was to hide them things—" pointing to the bag of jewels—"in the ship—"

"Where?" interrupted the flyer.

"Underneath the cushion o' the back seat. Then I was to express the rest o' the stuff tuh Barclay—"

"Who?"

"Barclay—Stanton, I mean, at the carnival," stammered the crook.

"I see. Very neat," commented Clancy.

"Listen," said Rex. "You go back to the house. I'll land this bird in the jug and come back. You understand—don't warn Stanton of anything, see? I don't know yet where we go tomorrow morning, and he'll undoubtedly plan to drop off these things as they've done several times before, and we want to land whoever's waiting."

They discussed the matter for a moment, Clancy still holding his gun against the captive's side. A few people passing by the corner did not show any sign of curiosity. The three seemed to be simply having a casual chat on the street.

Rex re-wrapped the bundle.

"All O. K.—let's go," he said. "And don't wax merry, young man, because my gun's in my coat pocket and my hand's right on it."

Clancy made off for Granger's residence with rapid strides, while Rex and his companion started more leisurely for the center of town in search of a policeman. The man said his name was Fallon, and maintained that he knew nothing of what was in the bundle. Under Rex's merciless questioning, however, the cringing crook told what he maintained was all he knew.

There were ten men in all, he said, and they made their headquarters in different cities. One at a time would be called on for certain service. All were experienced criminals in various lines. He, for instance, had been told to come to Mercer, call at Granger's house at seven o'clock, and get the package. As soon as he had cached the jewels and expressed the package his work was done.

He knew nothing of how the robbery had been planned, or the exact identity of the man who was to receive the loot by airplane, or indeed where it was disposed of. They all re-

ceived a certain set price for each job from Stanton. Stanton's true name, it appeared, was Barclay, and Fallon knew little of his history. He had been inducted into the gang through a friend of his. He refused to give the identity of the other members of the gang whom he knew, however.

"You'll get over that," remarked Rex. "Unless you want to serve a few years more than you have to. Hello, here's a cop now."

The burly policeman, who was standing on a corner twiddling his stick idly, nearly fell over backward when he got a glimpse of Rex's badge.

"Take charge of this bird and put him in the jug. Charge him with carrying a concealed weapon, for the night. Here's the gun I took from him. Take this package and guard it as you would your life. Keep your mouth shut about everything, understand? We're after big game, and everybody'll know about it by tomorrow."

The guardian of the law did not fully comprehend his instructions but finally Rex succeeded in making them clear.

"Very well, sor!" the officer said respect-

fully. "You'll find your man and your package, sor. Come on, you!"

Rex made his way back to the house and rang the doorbell. He was armed with an excuse for his presence, if one was necessary, but it was not. A curious, rapidly growing group outside the gate prepared him for the policeman who loomed on the lawn, to guard the crowd, and for another who opened the door. Both men passed him instantly. Clancy had apparently prepared them.

He found Clancy, a captain of police, Granger, Stanton, and an old negro in the library. It was a cozy room, furnished in excellent taste, and hundreds of books lined it on two sides nearly to the ceiling.

"I just heard about the robbery, and thought I'd see if there was anything I could do," Rex said in answer to Stanton's inquiring gaze. "What happened?"

"Who's this?" demanded Clancy truculently, motioning toward Rex.

Rex grinned at the man's quick wit.

"He's one of my employees—flew the plane over here," said Stanton gently. "A very audacious crime, Mr. Lee."

"I want to question Mr. Granger alone," stated Clancy. "Does that suit you, chief? Of course, I wasn't meaning that you wouldn't be here—"

"Just the idea I had myself," returned the black-mustached captain.

Rex and Stanton and the old darky went out.

"What happened?" demanded Rex.

Stanton limped to a chair and sat down wearily.

"My friend Granger brought some valuable jewels here to show me. I have a weakness for them, and they are not a bad investment," he said. "While I was upstairs bathing and shaving, a man described as being a big, stout man with a mask on his face and a scar on his chin came into the kitchen, without warning, and knocked the old darky out with the butt of a revolver before he could do or say anything. Then he bound and gagged him. The robber did the same thing with Mr. Granger—knocked him out, bound and gagged him, and then made off with ten thousand dollars' worth of jewels. I found them tied up when I came down stairs and notified the police."

Rex grinned significantly into Stanton's expressionless eyes.

"Clever work," he opined, with the suspicion of a wink. "I suppose the warning's out all over town to nab a big man with a scar on his face."

"I presume so," returned Stanton.

"Mr. Lee! Step in, please. We wish to question you," barked the policeman. "Thank you, Mr. Granger."

Rex sent a reassuring smile at Stanton, and went in, passing Granger who looked suddenly better. The door of the library closed behind him, and he was met by a duo of wide grins.

"Got the lay?" demanded Clancy.

"Part of it—tell me the rest."

"Just as I got here the police were arriving, notified by Stanton. I got hold of them, told 'em who I was before we went in and posed as a detective for the city. I put the cap' here and the other cops wise to the whole lay, and Stanton ain't got the least idea his friend is captured, or that his little game is up.

"Wasn't it pretty, though? Stanton goes up to dress, puts on this pneumatic suit of his

while the water's running in the tub, mind you, and then comes downstairs, all togged out, knocks out the two birds, gets the jewels, slips the whole bunch in a package and gets rid of it after he has become Stanton again, and then notifies the police. He must be an artist on make-up."

"Does Granger know all about it?" asked Rex Lee.

"Yeah, he's in, too," the captain vouchsafed. "Everybody knows but Stanton."

"How did Stanton come to be here?" asked the flyer.

"He and Granger got acquainted when this carnival was here. Granger liked him—said he knew all about books and that stuff. Then Stanton writes him and says he wants to buy some diamonds and says he wants to give Granger the business. Then this party was framed up—Stanton to come over and Granger was to submit these jewels to him. Stanton said he was so busy it'd have to be a quick trip, and so forth, and so it was decided to do the business here at the house. In fact, Granger says he half-believes the first sugges-

tion of havin' Stanton look 'em over came from him.

"The boy's clever, all right," the operative went on admiringly. "Granger wouldn't believe the big duke that came in here and socked him was Stanton until I'd told him all we knew. That pneumatic suit, a change of clothes, big shoes, a good wig, even that made-up scar on his face—it's a knockout, ain't it?"

"In all of these jobs he pulled he must have had some quiet place spotted to put on his clothes. Probably wore that pneumatic outfit and his big clothes right over his ordinary haberdashery. Didn't you say he'd been an actor, Lee? I thought so. It wouldn't be a minute's work for an experienced man to shove his arms and legs through that suit, slap on breeches and coat and vest with a false shirt and collar like actors use often, and put on that wig. Could do it in a car or in some little outhouse. Maybe he did it sometimes down to the carnival and slipped out and then back. Planning like these boys did, they'd o' had the time and the place for the quick switch all set. Ain't it a knockout?"

"It prob'ly would of knocked the police of this town sky-high," admitted the captain.

"We got it all set for tomorrow," Clancy went on. "Granger won't let on he knows anything, and I'll drive you and Stanton out as per schedule. I also got it fixed for Service to go out as a friend o' Granger's that wants to take a look at the take-off. Then, as soon as you find out whether Stanton's going to drop this boodle to some other egg in some town—by the way, ain't that a bear of a frame-up to shuffle swag till it can't be found?—you can nab Stanton and you and Service go after the other bozo all sweet and pretty. I'll be hangin' around to take charge of Stanton when you get through with him. Where's the jewels?"

"Right here," said Rex. "I'll put something in the bag and stick it in the ship under the cushion so that Stanton'll think the stuff is there."

Clancy counted the flashing gems as quickly as possible.

"Fourteen—right. Well, cap', you'll have an inconspicuous cop across the street somewhere, I suppose, to see Stanton don't take any funny notions?"

The captain nodded.

"Well, we'll mosey then. We got to meet Service."

They came out into the hall, and then went into the dining-room, where pert little Granger was talking with Stanton. The criminal was certainly an actor, reflected Rex, looking with new wonder at the stooped, bald man standing before him.

His suspicions about that foot had been the starting point of the deductions which were now coming to a climax. Then the fact that Stanton had mentioned being an actor, and that so many times the famous man with the scar had simply disappeared had turned his mind, and Service's also, to complete disguise as the only solution.

Rex had really never been at all certain that his wild idea was anywhere near correct, for it seemed too much of a change from a thin, stooped cripple to a big, stout, scarred man with normal use of his legs. Service's clock-like mind, after Rex's story, had reached the conclusion that Stanton and the man with the scar might be one and the same, and that had fortified Rex in his hypothesis.

Stanton looked at him questioningly, and Rex smiled his reassurance.

"Well, we're leavin'," Clancy announced. "I'm sure we'll get our man, Mr. Granger. By this time he won't have a chance to get twenty miles without being caught. We can't do any more here. 'Night, everybody."

The captain went out with Clancy, and Rex tarried behind. He heard the story of the robbery again from Granger, commiserated with him on his loss, assured him that there was no chance for the criminal to escape, and then made his adieux, satisfied that Stanton was without suspicion that anything was amiss with his plan.

CHAPTER XII

ROUND-UP

Promptly at six o'clock Mr. Granger and Stanton drew up in front of the hotel. Rex emerged, followed a moment later by Service. Granger, well-coached in his rôle, performed the introductions, and Service and Rex shook hands like strangers.

Out at the field Rex, assisted by Service, who had volunteered, pulled out the stakes and untied the ropes. Stanton limped over beside the rear cockpit, and the closely watching agents saw him feel of the cushion. Rex had planted the bag of supposed jewels late the night before, so he knew that Stanton's groping hand would find what it sought.

Before wiring the suit-cases on the ship Rex came up to Stanton and asked in a low tone—

"Where to, Mr. Stanton?"

"Coalville. Field one mile due east of town, bounded on north and south by dirt roads. An automobile will be parked on the northern road.

If it faces west, fly low and give me a chance to drop a package to a man who will be waiting. If it faces east, do not fly low but fool around over town for a while until the signal comes that everything is clear."

Rex put his hand in his pocket carelessly. Service, wrapping the stakes in a bundle, was about twenty feet away.

"Now, throw up your hands, Mr. Stanton!" snapped Rex, and a Colt appeared in his hands with the effect of magic.

Service straightened, and another gun was pointed at the luckless Stanton.

The man leaned heavily on his cane, and said quietly, wearily—

"Just what does this mean, Lee?"

"It means that Mr. Service and I are secret service agents, and that I was planted with your carnival to try and solve some mysterious crimes, and that we know you stole those jewels last night, how you have been in the habit of disguising yourself, have captured your confederate who took jewels and disguise away from the house, and have the loot, in addition to a confession from him."

Stanton said nothing. His opaque eyes

rested steadily on Lee's face, and then turned slightly to include the tense Granger, who was now standing close by. A Ford drove up, and Clancy climbed out.

"I see," said Stanton at length. "Can I take my hand down?"

"Just a minute," said Service, and rapidly searched him. Stanton was unarmed.

Slowly the man threw away his stick, and straightened up. His crippled foot disappeared, as did the stoop.

"Well, business as usual," said Clancy briskly. "Ready for me to take 'im away?"

"All ready," nodded Service. "We'll be back in a couple of hours."

Stanton walked slowly to the Ford, carrying his suit-case, looking neither to the right nor to the left, and saying nothing. In a moment he was on his way back to town in custody of the ubiquitous Clancy.

Granger talked ebulliently and admiringly as Lee wired his own suit-case on the right wing, snug up against the fuselage. Lee instructed Service how to put on the switch and jazz the throttle when he cranked the motor, and Tom installed himself in the cockpit. Lee, making

sure that the wheel-blocks were tight against the tires, spun the propeller to draw gas into the cylinders and then yelled—

"Contact!"

He cranked, but the cold motor did not start. After five minutes of work that left the lanky pilot hot and perspiring the engine finally condescended to start, and Rex leaped like a kangaroo for the side of the ship to jockey it along with throttle and spark. In a moment it was idling smoothly, and Service got out. He put on the helmet and goggles which had been the apparel of Stanton, and Rex likewise adjusted his own.

After a five-minute warm-up the thermometer was nearly seventy and Lee decided they could start. Oil and air were reading correctly, and the motor, during its momentary opportunity to run wide open, ran without a hitch and r.p.m. was satisfactory—fifteen hundred. Rex kicked out the wheel-blocks, assured the bubbling, excited Granger that they would be back in a little while, and then strapped himself in. Service nodded that he was ready, and in a moment the ship taxied up for the take-off.

They were off the ground half-way down the field, and in slow, ever-widening circles Rex kept within gliding distance of his landing field while he got his altitude. They were circling in a valley, below the tops of mountains which seemed to hem them in on every side save for the gorge cut by the river. As a matter of fact, the flat land on which Valley was set was four miles wide, but in a ship traveling over a mile a minute the distance seemed small.

At two thousand feet, with motor throttled to fourteen hundred and fifty revolutions a minute, Rex strained his eyes through the thick ground mist and picked up the railroad which his map showed him would lead him to Coalville. It led along the side of the river for a while, so he banked and straightened for his course.

It was chilly yet, and below, the valleys seemed filled with solid mother-of-pearl. Fringes of mist floated around the mountains, even toward their hoary crests, deepening into opaque fog in the valleys. The rays of the sun flashed from the metal of the ship, but the earth below was still in shadow.

Mile after mile reeled behind them, Rex

keeping careful track of the towns they passed to make certain he would know Coalville when he saw it. It was marked by the conjunction of two railroads, but he wanted to make assurance doubly sure by having a check, so his gaze alternated constantly between map and ground as he followed the thin steel thread that wound among the mountains.

He had expected more trouble with Stanton, he reflected. The man had apparently realized that his game was up and that he had not a chance to escape, but oftentimes desperation makes a man forget the odds. It must have been a stunning surprise to him to find that he was caught, for the ingenuity of his disguise was really remarkable. The pneumatic suit was divided into compartments, with opening for head, legs, and arms. By pumping these various compartments up to varying degrees, the illusion of a big, somewhat obese torso could be made perfect.

Different clothes, even to the big shoes, an expensive wig, and artistic make-up, completed a disguise that, as Granger's original disbelief had proven, was practically impenetrable. Add to that the fact that Stanton was even playing

a part in pretending to be crippled and stooped, and it was no wonder that he had been able to disappear within fifteen minutes after a robbery. The audacity and psychological effectiveness of that scar made up on his chin was also admirable—or would have been in a better cause.

Forty-five minutes after leaving Valley, Coalville showed ahead. The town was on a small tributary stream, and like Valley, was set in a small plain. Rex and Service both picked up the field quickly—and the car was headed west.

Rex wasted no time. He throttled the motor and nosed down in a steep dive that dropped them earthward with dizzying speed. He held his nose, and blew out his ears repeatedly, turning and signaling Service to do likewise. The ship corkscrewed around the field in a tight spiral. They could now see a man standing in the field, well out from the fence. That, undoubtedly, was their prospective victim, and he would be an important captive or he would not be trusted with the final disposal of the jewels.

Rex straightened out for his landing—which

would undoubtedly surprise and probably warn the man below. Speedy work would be necessary to capture him if he had a premonition that all was not as it should be.

The pilot was relieved that the field was a possibility for a landing, although very small. It would have meant a deal of extra trouble to have landed in some other field and then pursued the car which was to have carried the gems. He stalled down across the fence with barely speed enough to stay in the air, and hit the ground as he landed.

He pushed on the throttle to taxi as quickly as possible toward the waiting man, who had now retreated a few steps toward the fence. He tried to keep the nose of the ship pointed toward him so that he would not be able to see that Stanton himself was not in the back seat.

He was unsuccessful, however. As they got within fifty yards of the man, that gentleman suddenly decided that safety first was his motto, and ran for his car. Service vaulted over the side of the cockpit, tugging for his gun. The sight of his chubby form, and the gun, decided the other man, who was alone in the car. In an instant he was off like a shot,

and Service's bullets had no apparent effect.

Rex jumped out before the ship had stopped rolling.

"Find yourself a car and chase him. I'll fly over him to let you know where he is!" he said rapidly. "That road leads right up into the mountains, and I don't think there are any cross-roads!"

Service nodded and started at a half-run for the road, which led directly into town. Rex got in the ship and taxied leisurely up to the field for the take-off. There was no hurry as far as he was concerned.

He had a bad moment on the take-off for trees on the far side of the road were high, and he had to bank between two of them. He missed them by perhaps ten feet as his Jenny curved through, twenty feet off the ground, but there was no harm done. To an expert eye at least five hundred hours of flying would have shown plainly in the way Rex accomplished it.

He straightened out the plane, and circled upward. At five hundred feet the speeding motor car could be seen plainly, as could Service. With the ship in a steep climb Rex watched the progress of matters below. Serv-

ice was speeding for a main highway a quarter of a mile away. He was trotting along tirelessly, like a cross-country runner. At intervals cars passed along the pike, so there would probably be little delay after he reached his goal.

Rex headed toward the mountain for which the car was speeding. From his altitude, now fifteen hundred feet, the twisting ribbon of the road, curving around the mountainside, was discernible for many miles. He drove on ahead of the car, watching for cross-roads. Finally, as the car was climbing up the side of the mountain, taking hair-pin curves at dizzy speed, the ship roared over the crest and the car was lost to sight.

The flyer was still scrutinizing the ground closely for cross-roads, but as he got further on he could see that there were absolutely none, and no immediate possibility of any.

On one side of the road there was an almost sheer drop of fully eight hundred feet to a thickly wooded ravine which separated two mountains. On the other side of the road the slope was steep and heavily wooded. The plain surrounding the town was out of sight

now, and the ship was flying over wild and desolate country. It seemed incongruous to think of smiling fields and a small city ten miles away through the pass.

Rex banked around and straightened to go back and see whether the pursuit had started. As he did so, the motor simply stopped. No preliminary sputter, no warning of any kind whatsoever. With a suddenness like a physical shock, Rex found himself floating above the untamed wilderness in a great silence.

Rarely, if ever, had such bitterly self-condemnatory phrases ever passed his lips. In an instant his fast-working brain found the solution, and it was not a flattering one. The ship had simply run out of gas, due to his own lack of forethought.

"Deuce of a flyer I am," he rasped viciously. "Thought it'd run on its reputation!"

For a moment he forgot the desperation of his plight in his searing self-contempt, but he came to himself with a snap. His eyes swept the forest below, noting the jagged, outcropping cliffs and towering trees. There was not a ten-feet-square clearing in all that rolling panorama.

"Mush into the trees and take my medicine," he thought, with a curious tingle running up and down his spine.

Lower and lower the ship swept in a wide spiral while he tried to find a place that looked as if he might land and still keep his neck intact. He was resigned to a broken leg, perhaps—

Then he saw a chance to gamble. It meant either absolute safety or almost certain serious injury.

There was a straight stretch of road, a hundred yards long, and on one side of it, where the mountain swept down to it, there was a space a few feet wide, apparently hollowed out to let cars pass. On the other side of the road the ravine dropped sheer from the very edge. Could he land on that road, hold the ship on it for a few seconds while it lost speed, and then smash it into the mountainside? If it tumbled off into the ravine, it would drop five hundred feet out of control, and to escape badly mangled instead of dead would be almost a miracle.

Without hesitation he took the chance. The next few seconds were of the sort that all flyers

know and most of them love—after they are over. Even as he swept around and jockeyed for position there was a sort of fierce joy in the thrill of what was coming.

With no motor to help him, absolute judgment of speed, angle of glide, and distance were necessary. There was a sharp curve in the road before it straightened into that stretch, and Rex brought the Jenny down over it at seventy miles an hour. He could not make a stall landing, for after he hit the road he must have plenty of speed to make the rudder work and thus handle his ship on the ground.

He hit squarely in the middle of the road, skimming along on two wheels. To his left the wing-tip barely escaped the hillside. To his right he could look almost straight down into the chasm. There was not a foot of leeway between his outside wheel and the yawning gulf.

Like a speeding locomotive the ship skimmed the highway. With the matchless skill that was his he worked the rudder with a delicacy and finesse that resulted in almost absolute accuracy. Not three inches to right or left—until the curve loomed ahead.

The tail-skid was down now, and the speed somewhat reduced. With all his strength Rex jammed on his left rudder and swept the stick to the right. Both tires burst with a loud report and the ship swerved to the left. With up-flung hand to protect his face he waited the split-second that seemed like an eternity. Then came a rending crash as left wings crumpled and the nose smashed into the hillside.

The ship telescoped a trifle—the motor was knocked back six inches. Rex climbed out, absolutely unhurt.

He wasted no time in self-congratulation.

"I wonder whether yon bozo saw the plane come down," he soliloquized. Immediately he decided that the chances were excellent that his impromptu landing was still a secret. The car was climbing up the other side of the mountain, and he might have landed without the fugitive's knowledge. It made but little difference—the man was hemmed in ahead and behind now, for the wreck of the ship was squarely in the narrow road.

Rex hid himself behind a tree at the lower turn in the road and watched as patiently as he

could. Twenty minutes passed without any action. He began to think that the man had seen him and had possibly deserted his car to plunge into the woods on foot, when the noise of a fast-firing motor came to his ears.

Gun in hand, he waited. In a moment a big touring car swayed around the turn. The stout, well-dressed man who had been waiting at the field was behind the wheel.

Rex could hear a startled exclamation from the man as the car skidded to a stop. Then, taking careful aim, he fired at a tire in order to make assurance doubly sure. The man might attempt to drive through the crumpled fuselage—the motor itself was next to the bank.

The tire burst with satisfying gusto.

The fleeing crook gave one terrified glance at the hillside, and saw Rex emerging from his retreat.

"Hands up—"

Like a flash the man was out of the car and had disappeared over the edge of the ravine. In kangaroo-like bounds the flyer was after him. The fugitive was half-rolling down the almost sheer slope.

"Out of control!" grinned Rex, and without hesitation launched himself over the rim of the chasm.

The feat he actually performed amounted virtually to a thirty-foot leap. His body scarcely touched the pebbly embankment on the way down. His feet dug into the earth ten feet above the floundering man ahead, but Rex's momentum was scarcely lessened. In a half-slide that ripped his clothing to shreds and scratched him cruelly he catapulted down on his prey.

Locked in each other's arms, kicking and clawing like beasts, they tore down the slope. Earth was in Lee's mouth, and in his eyes, and he was scarcely conscious of where he was, but he hung on grimly. They smashed into a stump, and for a moment both ceased their efforts as the shock dazed them. Rex himself was groggy and breathless, and not until the other man started to fight loose did he fully regain his senses.

The struggle was brief but fierce, and when Rex finally found himself holding the other man down his face was a mass of scratches

from which the blood flowed freely. His big captive drew in his breath in sobbing gasps. He, too, was an awesome sight.

Rex was surprised to find that the man had no gun. His clothing—what was left of it—was of excellent material and tailoring. He made no resistance as Rex took a cardcase and some letters.

"Lionel B. Young and Co., Jewelers, Rothwell, Ohio," said Rex aloud, and for a moment was afraid that he might have an innocent man captive between his knees. Then he remembered the sudden flight and felt secure again. For Rothwell was a city of good size, and if this man was Lionel B. Young, as the letters indicated, he might be by way of being a prominent citizen.

"Get up, and let's climb out of here," Rex said, taking the gun from his pocket. Luckily it had not been lost in the scuffle.

The man staggered to his feet. He was rather impressive looking—his portly form surmounted by a broad, fleshy face and graying black hair. His mouth was full and sensual and below it the chin was round and weak.

Before his recent trip down the hillside he had evidently been dressed immaculately and in excellent taste.

"Who are you?" he demanded, his breath still coming in gulps. He wiped off the blood with a silk handkerchief.

Rex uncovered his badge, and the man sank to the ground weakly.

"I knew it," he said hopelessly.

"Let's get up on the road," said Rex again, and his prisoner got to his feet obediently.

It was a tough struggle to climb back up the slope, but finally they made it. The captive sat down at the edge of the ravine and his head sank into his hands.

"Are you Mr. Young?" asked Rex.

He had two cigarettes in his hand and offered one to his companion, who refused with a shake of the head.

"Yes," he said wearily.

Rex digested this fact for a moment. The ramifications of Stanton's conspiracy were beginning to reach far and high, it seemed.

Suddenly Young turned to the flyer, and desperation flamed in his rather fine eyes.

"If I should jump down this slope again, would you shoot?" he demanded.

"Why?" countered the surprised pilot.

"Because I'd give anything in this world to be dead this minute!" rejoined Young in a low voice.

"I'm afraid I'd have to try to get you without shooting," stated Rex. "Are you in this thing very deep?"

For a moment the stricken jeweler did not answer, and then in a sudden burst of words the story tumbled out. It was approximately as Rex had suspected. Young, somewhat a man-about-town, had been caught in one of the webs spun by Stanton; then had come blackmailing threats, and the amount of money demanded was prohibitive, for he had always lived up to his income. Then Stanton had appeared with an alternative—that Young buy jewels from him, Stanton, at various times and dispose of them in new settings. This he could do with moderate safety, due to his established reputation. He had never been told, he said, that the jewels were stolen, but of course he had known it. This was the first

time he had ever been called on actually to receive them—usually they had been delivered to him.

"Blackmail is a tough game," said Rex slowly. "And I doubt if there's one man in a thousand who hasn't some time or other exposed himself to it, so to speak. But buck up, Mr. Young. I failed to warn you that anything you said would be used against you, so whether I'm right about it or not, I'll see what can be done. The fact that you never actually could prove that the jewels were stolen will help somewhat—it may be a scandal but there's nothing to commit suicide about."

He had Young feeling better when Service roared up to them in a big red car. Service thanked the interested young man who had been his chauffeur, and then listened to the story. A half-hour later, with the help of drivers who were stopped by the airplane wreck, they cleared the road of wreckage and put a spare tire on Young's car, and then proceeded back to town.

"Looks like a good haul, taking it by and large," grinned Service as he settled back in

the seat. He was in front with Rex who was driving. The car was Young's.

"Fair," agreed Rex. "The last twenty hours have been full of surmises and conclusions."

"And you won't have to be looking keenly around any more," chuckled Service, "after you get to town. For the love of Mike, remember you're a detective, though, until you leave these curves behind you!"

CHAPTER XIII

NEW WORLDS TO CONQUER

THREE busy days later Rex and Service, in different stages of undress, were lounging in a hotel room in Valley, talking over the various ramifications of their recent swoop upon Stanton and his organization.

Every detail, practically speaking, was well in hand. Stanton and Levin and Fancy Nan Barrett had absolutely refused to talk, but Fallon had opened the floodgates and spouted like Old Faithful. Schrader, the dapper advance man, had also gone into eruption, and between the two of them the identity of every member of the gang had been learned, and all but one apprehended.

The scheme was exactly as Service and Rex had figured it. Schrader, next to Stanton, was the big man of the organization, although it was a remarkable fact that no single member was in complete confidence of the chief, except possibly Nan Barrett.

Schrader "smelt out" possibilities of crime. When he left a town he was thoroughly acquainted with every representative of the government therein, and submitted a detailed report which showed the possibilities of the town both from a carnival and straight crime viewpoint—whether or not anyone would stand for a bribe, just how wide open the show might be able to run, and any particularly luscious criminal opportunities were included in his report. His share was a straight salary of two hundred dollars a week and expenses.

Blackmail had been responsible for the fact that the pay-roll robbery had been a surety, due to the guards' having useless guns. One guard had been forced to slip the blanks into the two guns, which he could do without suspicion. This was elicited from the guard who had been known to be friendly with Schrader when the agent who interviewed him bluffed him with what knowledge was already in the hands of the authorities.

After Schrader had outlined possibilities of a crime, another man was sent in—usually Fallon—to get more detailed information. Then Fallon would leave, and when the carni-

val came to town still another of the ten members of the gang would appear, "pull the job" with the disguised Stanton, and in ten more minutes be off by airplane with the loot.

In most cases the confederate both came and went by airplane. Stanton relied on his double-barreled disguise. Each man was paid a generous lump sum for his services. As things looked now to Rex and Service, the connection of Levin with the organization consisted merely in a knowledge of it, and a split on the proceeds. There was no proof of any actual physical participation in the crimes themselves by either him or Nan.

Traced by the name of Barclay, the man known as Stanton was found to have been a vaudeville actor whose specialty was character work and quick changes of costume. He had presented a playlet in which he took all the parts—known as a "protean act" in the parlance of the stage—and had dropped from sight over two years before.

By piecing together all the stories, the scheme had been laid bare down to the smallest detail. No one of the prisoners could have told it all, for each man seemed to be entirely

ignorant of any phase but his own. Even Schrader, for instance, did not know how the loot was disposed of, nor did any of the others except a man named Wiggins, who had acted as messenger between airplane and Young.

Young had been used this time because of Wiggins' illness, and Stanton apparently did not wish to allow any further members of his organization to learn the secret. He had never, it appeared, allowed either jewels or currency to remain in his possession, obviously preferring to rely on the fact that his henchmen would not double-cross him as long as they had such safe and lucrative jobs.

The whole scheme had been framed with the idea of cutting all threads by which Government agents, after solving one robbery, might be led to a solution of the rest. The use of different men for the crimes themselves, and for each step in the preparation of them, added to the fact that no one knew more than was absolutely necessary, plainly showed that Stanton was taking every possible precaution.

It appeared that Young, Levin and Nan Barrett would escape with lighter punishment than the others, all of whom had criminal rec-

ords save Schrader. Levin was at present free on a $20,000 bond in order to put his business affairs in shape.

As a matter of fact, the wide publicity given the wholesale arrests had resulted in a huge business boom for the carnival. The big attendance could not be used to the limit, however, for there had been a sudden change in the methods of the Levin-Willet shows. The privilege car was dreary and lifeless, and the grifters had disappeared to parts unknown. The merchandise games were running squarely and the badge girls' cry was heard no more.

"Well, Rex, I guess we're on a hard-earned vacation for a w-while," said Service finally, "and I'm tickled to death."

"How long before that resignation of yours'll be accepted?" queried Lee.

"Oh, a week or so, probably."

"And then we simmer down to the sea and start to go places?" demanded the flyer.

"Right."

"Good. Any more excitement I'm adjacent to must be located where I can take it easy!"

THE END

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